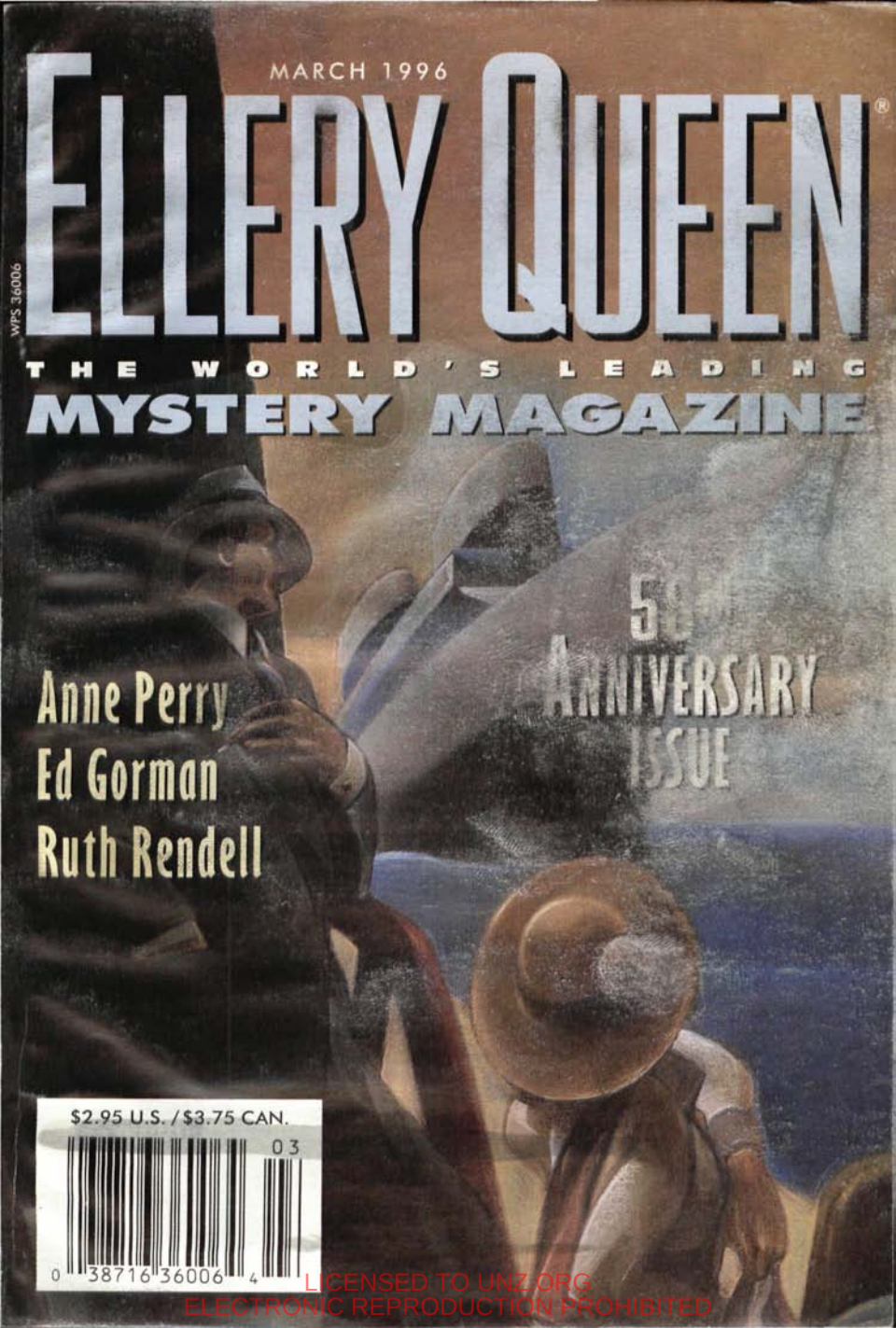

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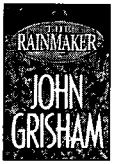

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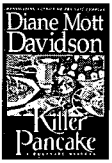

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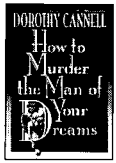

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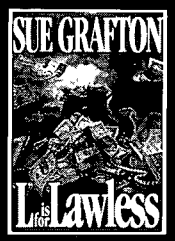

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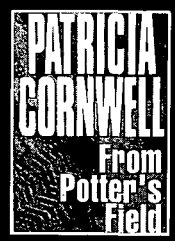

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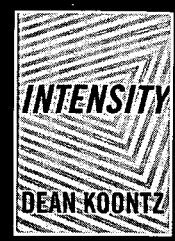

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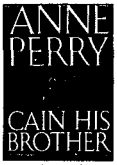

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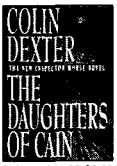

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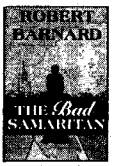

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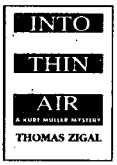

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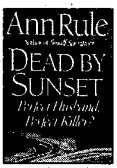

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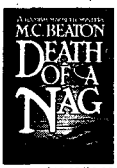

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Poetry Contest $24,000 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months

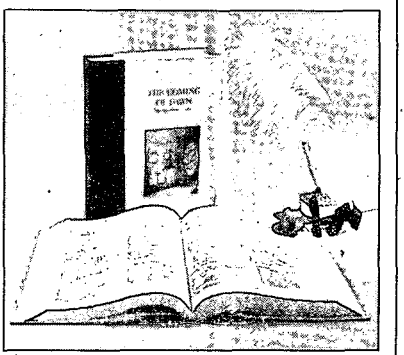
Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that $24,000 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in ONLY ONE original poem, any subject, any style to:

The National Library of Poetry
11419 Cronridge Drive
PO Box 704-6123
Owings Mills, MD 21117



The Coming of Dawn, featured above, is one of National Library of Poetry's recent deluxe hardbound anthologies.

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "Each poem received will be acknowledged, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely. Every poet who enters will receive an evaluation of their artistry.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

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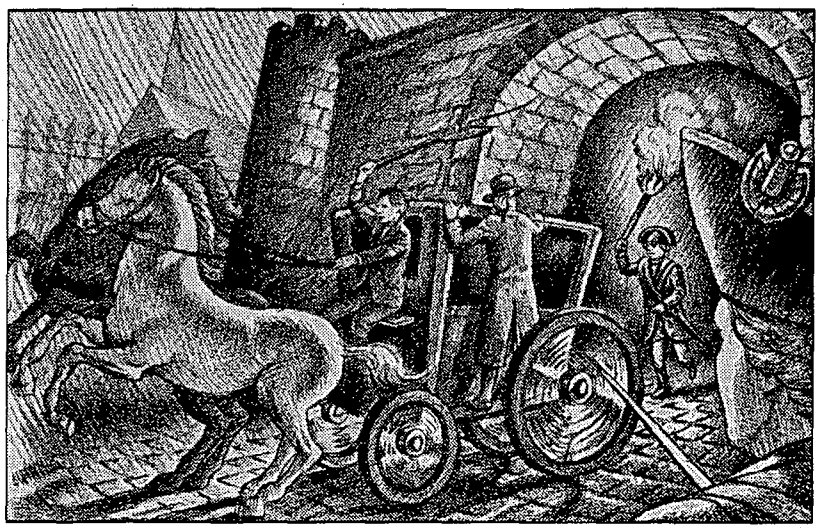

Art by Ken Joudrey

THE ESCAPE

by Anne Perry

The rescue from the prison of La Force was very carefully planned. Sebastien had taken care of every detail himself, and no one had been told anything they did not have to know. By eight in the evening everyone was in his place.

Jacques was doing no more than driving the coach which had taken them all to La Force, where the man they had come for was lodged pending his trial before the Commander of Public Safety, and inevitably his execution by the guillotine.

He was a young aristocrat named Maximilien de Fleury who was there simply because his father's estates had been confiscated and it was necessary to indict him also in order that they could remain in the hands — and in the pockets — of the government. No other charges were known against him beyond those of idleness and wealth, in Paris in 1792, a crime unto death.

A bribe had been very carefully placed so that his family might

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visit him for one last time. A plea for clemency, plus several sous, had obtained the promise from a guard to find himself otherwise occupied, so that they might have time alone, during which some swift changes would take place. A very fine forgery executed by Philippe was to be substituted for their pass documents, and in the torchlight four of them would leave where three had come in.

Nicolette was very good indeed at distracting people's concentration by a variety of means, as seemed most suitable according to the nature and status of those whose attention was to be held. She was not a beautiful girl in the usual sense, but she could affect beauty in such a way that it beguiled the mind. One saw the grace and the confidence in her walk, the vitality in her, the imagination and intelligence, and a certain air of courage which intrigued.

She could discard it as quickly and be timid, gentle, demure. Or she could be weary and frightened and appeal for help. She had even aroused the respect of guards Sebastien had thought beyond the human decencies. It never ceased to surprise him, because over the last year he had come to know something of the woman beneath the facade. She had joined the small group in the beginning, two years ago when they had just banded together, tentatively at first, to rescue a friend from one of the many prisons in Paris, before he faced trial and death. There were five of them, Sebastien, Nicolette, Etienne, Philippe the forger, and now Jacques.

This March, Fawcett Books will be releasing *Pentecost Alley,* the latest in the series of Victorian mysteries (featuring Inspector Thomas Pitt) with which Anne Perry began her career as a mystery writer in 1979. Fawcett also recently brought out a new book in the author's other long-running series, starring 1850s police inspector William Monk. (See *Cain His Brother.)* The idea for Ms. Perry's new short story arose out of work she is currently doing on a book set during the French Revolution—a period whose horror she recaptures brilliantly. †

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Another rescue had followed swiftly, and then a third. By the end of 1792 they had snatched several more people from the Committee's prisons, and failed with three. This year they had attempted more, and succeeded.

Now Sebastien was walking beside Nicolette, her head bent demurely, as they passed the guards and gave them their papers, identifying them as Citizen de Fleury's sister and brother-in-law, come, with the jailor's generous permission, to visit him a last time. A few paces behind them Etienne followed, named in the same document as a brother. All of them, as always, wore a slight disguise, so they would not easily be recognized again. Sometimes it was powdered hair, sometimes a false beard or moustache, a change of complexion with a little paint, a blemish, and of course different clothes.

They walked slowly; it was a natural thing to do in the cold, torchlit passages towards the entrance of the cells. Their feet echoed on the stone floor and the darkness beyond the flame's glare seemed filled with sighs and whispers, as if all the pain of the thousands of inmates was left here after their shivering bodies had been taken out for the last time. Nicolette moved closer to Sebastien, and without thought he put his arm round her.

They presented their identification and their notes of permission to the turnkey and slowly, every movement as if in a dream, he took them, perused them, and passed them back. Then he lifted his great iron keys and placed one in the lock. The bolts fell with a clang, and he pushed open the door.

With a barely perceptible shudder Sebastien went in, his finger to his lips where the guard could not see it, in silent warning. De Fleury looked round, his face white with fear, to see who had intruded on him at this hour. It was only too apparent he expected the worst: a hasty trial and summary execution at first light. It was not uncommon.

"Maximilien!" Nicolette ran to him and threw her arms round him, her lips close to his ear. Sebastien knew she would be telling him not to show surprise or ignorance, that they had come to rescue him and he must follow their lead in everything they said.

Sebastien went after her across the icy, straw-covered floor and wrung de Fleury by the hand, his eyes steady, warning.

The turnkey banged the door shut. Sebastien's heart was in his mouth, his ears straining. The lock did not turn. The man's footsteps died away as he went back up the corridor. Etienne stood

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guard, shifting nervously from one foot to the other.

"Quickly!" Sebastien took off his cloak, a large mantle of a garment, and held it out to de Fleury. "Put it on," he ordered.

"They'll never let me out!" de Fleury protested, his eyes wild as hope and reason fought in his mind. "Three of you came in, they'll know to let only three of you out. And if you think finding the wrong one will make them let you go, you are dreaming. They'll execute you in my place, simply for aiding my escape. Don't you know that?" Some innate sense of honour forbade him accepting on these terms, but he could not withdraw his hand from the cloak.

"We have passes for four to leave," Sebastien explained. "The turnkey has been bribed to be elsewhere, and it is the changing of the guard who let us in. Be quick."

De Fleury hesitated only a moment. Incredulity turned to wonder in his face, and then relief. He seized the cloak and swung it round his shoulders even as he was moving towards the door.

"Don't run!" Etienne hissed at him.

De Fleury stopped, twisting round to look back at Sebastien.

"You're supposed to be taking your last leave of your family," Sebastien reminded him. "You aren't going to gallop out!"

"Oh . . . oh yes." De Fleury controlled himself with an effort, straightened his shoulders, and walked with agonizingly measured pace out through the cell door and along the torchlit passage towards the entrance. Once he even looked back as if to someone he knew.

Etienne and Nicolette came close behind him, and Sebastien last, closing the cell door, the new pass papers in his hand, for four people.

Nicolette moved ahead to catch up with de Fleury, clasping his arm and clinging to it. Every attitude of her body expressed grief.

They were twenty feet short of the outer gates. The guards moved across the passage to block their way. Sebastien felt his heart beating so hard his body shook with the violence of it. It was difficult to get his breath.

De Fleury faltered. Was Nicolette leaning on him, or in fact supporting him?

One of the guards brandished a musket.

De Fleury stopped. Etienne and Sebastien drew level with him and stopped also.

"Here," Sebastien offered the pass to the guard. He took it and

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read it, looking carefully from one to the other of them. Their faces were full of shadows in the torchlight. Each one stood motionless, at once afraid to meet their eyes, and afraid not to.

This was the relief guard. They had not seen them come in. The paper was for the exact number of people, three men and one woman.

There was no sound but the guard's breath rasping in his throat and the hiss and flicker of the torches in their brackets.

"Right," the guard said at last. "Out." He gestured to the great archway and on shaking legs de Fleury went down, Nicolette still at his side. It had begun to rain.

Sebastien and Etienne increased their pace, passing into the wide street. Etienne took Nicolette by the arm almost exactly as the shot rang out in the air above them.

They froze.

One of the guards came running through the archway and across the cobbles, his musket held in both hands, ready to raise and fire.

Sebastien swivelled round. He was about to ask what was the matter, when he saw the turnkey behind them, and the ugly truth leaped to his mind only too clearly.

"Citizen de Fleury!" the guard accused breathlessly, looking from one to the other of them.

Before de Fleury could move, Etienne put his hand on his arm and stepped forward himself.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

The guard stared at him, trying to discern his features in the erratic light.

Sebastien peered to see how far away the carriage was. Would Jacques have the cool-headedness to bring it forward even after he heard the musket shot? If not, they were lost.

The turnkey was coming out into the street as well, torch in his hand.

"Is it not bad enough we have to lose our brother, without bothering us at this time?" Etienne demanded, his voice shaking.

Sebastien heard the carriage wheels on the cobbles and saw the faint light on Jacques' pale hair. He turned back and caught Nicolette's eyes. He nodded imperceptibly.

Nicolette began to sink as if she would faint.

Sebastien started forward and picked her up, swinging past the guard and knocking the musket sideways and onto the stones.

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Etienne grasped de Fleury by the arm and as the carriage drew level, threw the door open, and pushed him in with all his might. De Fleury fell onto the floor, with Nicolette on top of him.

There were shouts of fury from the archway and swaying light as the turnkey came up, yelling for them to stop.

Sebastien knocked the barrel of the gun into the air, and then hauled himself onto the footplate at the side of the carriage just as it turned and picked up speed, and a moment later a musket shot rang out, and another, and another. One thudded into the woodwork, but it was nearly a yard away. Please God, Etienne was on the footplate.

They would call out the National Guard, of course they would, but by then de Fleury would be on the road to Calais, and they would be back in the familiar streets and alleys of the Cordeliers district, invisible again — if only they could elude them for the next hour.

The rain was heavier, driving in his face, making a mist of the dark streets, dampening torches, sliming the cobbles under the horses' feet. The wood under Sebastien's fingers was wet as he clung on while the coach swayed and lurched along the Rue Saint Antoine towards the Place de la Bastille. He could still hear the sound of gunfire behind.

Was Etienne on the footplate, clinging on as he was, or had he been flung off, and was lying somewhere on the road, perhaps injured, or even dead. Perhaps one of the shots had caught him?

Jacques could see better in the dark than he could! They were close to the river. He could smell the water and see the faint gleam of reflections on the surface. They must be on the Quai de l'Hôtel de Ville. There were still shouts behind them, and another volley of shots. They were far too exposed in the open.

They swerved left into the Pont d'Arcole. The huge mass of Notre Dame loomed ahead on the Île de la Cité. They must find the narrow streets soon, the winding alleys of their own district.

They swept through an open square, more shots splattering around them, some sharp on the stones, others thudding heavily into the woodwork of the carriage. The driving rain was making it desperately hard to cling on. Sebastien was slithering wildly, his fingers bruised, his body aching. All his muscles seemed locked.

He was all but thrown off as they careered over the Petit Pont, across the Quai Saint-Michel, and finally into the narrow streets behind the Church of Saint Severin.

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When at last they stopped in the stable yard in the flaring torchlight, Sebastien was so numb he could barely let go. His fingers would not unbend. He saw Philippe's face white and streaked with rain as he ran out of the shelter of the doorway. The horses were shivering and streaked dark with sweat.

Sebastien dropped down onto the cobbles and almost fell, his body was so stiff, and hurt as if he had been battered.

"What happened?" Philippe demanded. "You look awful!" He looked at the coach, and his voice dropped. "It's riddled with splinters—a shot!" He lunged forward and yanked the door open, and Nicolette almost fell out. She was ashen.

Jacques scrambled off the box and came round the side. He too was soaked with rain, his hat was gone, and he looked exhausted and terrified. His eyes went straight to Sebastien.

"Etienne?" Sebastien asked the question which was in all their minds. "Where's Etienne? And de Fleury? Is he all right?"

Nicolette stared at him and shook her head minutely, barely a movement at all. "De Fleury's dead," she said in a small, tired voice. "One of the musket balls must have caught him. I don't even know when it happened. In the dark I didn't see, and he didn't cry out. In fact I never heard him speak at all. It could—it could have been the very first moment, when they were shooting at us before we even left the prison yard, or any time until we left them behind when we crossed the river."

There was a clatter of boots on the stones, and Etienne came round the back of the coach. He looked pale and very wet. There was blood on the sleeve of his coat, but he seemed otherwise unharmed.

Sebastien felt a surge of relief, and then instant guilt. He took the torch from Philippe and went to the coach, the door still swinging open as Nicolette had left it, and peered in.

De Fleury was half lying on the seat, the cape Sebastien had put round him in the prison crumpled, covering his body, his legs buckled as if he had been thrown violently when the coach had lurched from side to side as the horses careered through the darkness, shots screaming past them, thudding into the wood and ricocheting from the walls of the buildings on either side.

Sebastien held the torch higher so he could see de Fleury's face. With his other hand he moved the cloak aside. There was no mistaking death. The wide-open, sightless eyes were already glazed. He looked oddly surprised, as if in spite of all the terror of the

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prison, and then the sudden escape, the flight and the shooting of the guards behind him, he had not expected it.

Nicolette was close behind him. He handed her the torch and she held it, shaking a little, the light wavering, so he could use both hands to move de Fleury.

"What are we going to do with him?" she asked over his shoulder.

He had not yet thought as far as that. Other failures had stopped far earlier, before they had ever reached the prisoners, or else very soon after. Once before they had fled in rout, but the prisoner had remained behind, to face the guillotine. Decent disposal of the corpse had not been their responsibility. There were no churches open since the edict, and no priests in Paris openly. Religion was outlawed. You could go to the guillotine simply for harbouring a priest, let alone indulging in the rites of the faith.

Yet they could not simply leave him. They had offered him freedom, and now he was dead.

"I'll smuggle him outside Paris, as we were going to." It was Etienne's voice from the yard, behind Nicolette, his face wet in the torchlight, but he was beginning to regain his composure. "I'll bury him somewhere on the road to Calais." He grimaced. "At least that's better than a common grave with the other victims of the day's execution. Better a quiet coach ride towards Calais than a drive through the street mobs in a tumbrel."

"Yes, you'd better do that," Sebastien agreed. "Thank you." He leaned forward to straighten the cloak, to lift it and cover the face. In spite of the thousands who had died in the city since the storming of the Bastille nearly three years ago, the small gestures of decency still mattered—or perhaps because of them.

Etienne mistook his intention.

"Leave him there," he said quickly. "I'll take him out before dawn. Better in the dark. I'll make it look as if he's sleeping."

"Good," Sebastien acknowledged. "Thank you." He looked a moment longer at de Fleury's dead face. He felt guilty. Perhaps this death was better than the guillotine with all its deliberate horror, but that was little comfort now. They had still let him down. How had it happened? As always, no one else had known anything of their plans. They had been made only the night before. Why had the guard come back, and then followed them out to challenge them?

"I'm sorry," he whispered to de Fleury. He should leave him sit-

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ting up a little better. There was no point. It was a meaningless thing to do, but he still did it. It lent a kind of dignity.

Then he saw the hole in the back of the seat where the musket ball had come through. What an irony that the one ball that had penetrated through instead of merely splintering the wood and lodging in the upholstery, should have gone straight to his heart. There was blood on the seat, dark and shiny. Sebastien put his finger to the neat round hole, then froze. He had touched the ball, embedded in the wadding. That was impossible!

His mind whirled, bombarded with realisations that ended in one terrible, irreversible fact. De Fleury had been shot from the front, from inside the coach! That could only be either Nicolette or Etienne—or just conceivably Jacques, if he had somehow tied the reins for a few moments and swung down from the box, and in the confusion and the dark Nicolette had not seen him.

But why? Why on earth would any of them, people he had trusted with his life over and over again, kill de Fleury?

Nicolette was standing at his elbow, still holding the torch. Etienne was still waiting.

"Yes," Sebastien said steadily, moving back and away from the carriage door. He slammed it shut, turning to face them. Nicolette lowered the torch. It must be getting heavy. "Yes, that's a good idea." He did not know what else to say. The question roared round in his head: which one of them—and why?

He did not want to know. The friendships were too deep and too precious. The betrayal was hideous. But he had to know. The suspicion would stain them all, and worse than that, they could no longer trust any life to whoever had done this. It explained the guard's return, the shots, everything else.

It was still raining. They were all standing there watching him. Nicolette, her hair wet across her brow, her clothes sticking to her, her dress sodden; Etienne with his arm still bleeding, holding it across his chest now, to ease the weight of it; Jacques frightened and puzzled; Philippe beginning, as usual, to get cross. He had been waiting for them since they left, not knowing what had happened.

Sebastien forced himself to smile. "Let's go inside and at least have something hot to drink. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm frozen!"

There was a sigh of relief, a release of long-held tension. As one, they turned and followed him towards the light and the warmth.

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Sebastien slept from sheer exhaustion, but when he woke in the morning, late and with his head pounding, the question returned almost instantly. One of them had killed de Fleury, coldly and deliberately. When the rescue had succeeded, in spite of the betrayal of the plan to the guards, they had shot him in the coach as they fled through the night.

How? None of them had taken a gun into the prison. It would have been suicidal. It must have been left in the coach, against the eventuality of the escape not being foiled by the guards. That still meant that any of the three of them could have done it, Jacques most easily, he had obtained the coach, that had been his task. But it would have been very hard for him to have left the box and come into the coach to perform the act. When they were in a straight road, Nicolette would have been likely to have seen him.

Nicolette would have found it the easiest. It was she who had ridden in the coach alone with de Fleury. When had she put the gun there? He sat at the table in his rooms eating a breakfast of hot chocolate and two slices of bread. It was stale, but bread was scarce these days, and expensive. He went over the events of the previous day, from the time Jacques had brought the coach until they had left from the prison of La Force.

There was no time when Nicolette had been alone. She had helped Philippe with the forged papers, getting them exactly right, then she had been with Sebastien himself.

The question that remained was why? Why would Etienne have wished de Fleury dead? How did he even know him? If he had some bitter enmity with him, why had he not simply said so, and refused to be part of the rescue?

There was no alternative but to confront him with the evidence and demand the truth, at the same time hoping against reason that there was some explanation that did not damn him.

It was early evening when Sebastien knocked on the door of Etienne's rooms in the Rue de Seine. He had put it off all day, but it could wait no longer.

The door swung open and Etienne stood in the entrance, smiling.

"Sebastien!" he said with surprise and apparent pleasure. "Not another rescue? It must be someone very important for you to try now, so soon after this fiasco."

"No, not another escape. An answer, if you have one."

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Etienne's fair eyebrows shot up. "To what?"

"To why you betrayed us to the guard, and when that didn't work, why you shot de Fleury?"

Etienne stood motionless, his eyes unblinking. Seconds ticked by before he spoke. He measured Sebastien's nerve, weighed their friendship and all that they had shared, the dangers, the exultation of success and the bitterness of failures, and knew denial was no use.

"How did you know?" he said finally.

"The ball was still in the hole behind him. He was shot from in front."

"Careless of me," Etienne said with a very slight shrug. "I didn't see it. Thought it would be so far embedded in the wadding you'd never find it."

"I wouldn't have, if I hadn't put my finger in."

Etienne still had not moved. "Why not Nicolette? She was in there with him."

"You left the gun in the carriage . . . in case. She had no chance to do that."

"I see."

"Why?" Sebastien asked. "What was de Fleury to you?"

Etienne moved backward into the room, an elegant room with mementos of a more precious age, when it was still acceptable to be an aristocrat and have a coat of arms. One hung on the farther wall, two crossed swords beneath it.

"Nothing," Etienne replied. "Or to you either . . . compared with our friendship." He was not begging, there was something almost like amusement in his eyes, and regret, but no fear.

Then suddenly he darted backward with startling speed. His arm swung up and he grasped one of the swords from the wall and in an instant was facing Sebastien with it held low and pointing at him, ready to lunge. There was sadness in his eyes, but no wavering at all. He meant death, and he had both the will and the art to accomplish it.

They faced each other for a fraction of time so small it was barely measurable, then Sebastien threw himself to one side and scrambled to his feet as Etienne lunged forward. The blade ripped the chair open where a second before he had been standing.

There was no weapon for Sebastien. The other sword was still on the wall, ten feet away and behind Etienne. There was a silver candlestick on the table near the wall to his left. He dived towards

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it and his hand closed over it as Etienne darted forward again. The blade flickered like a shaft of light, drawing a thin thread of blood from Sebastien's arm and sending a sheet of pain through his flesh.

He parried Etienne's attack with the candlestick, but it was a poor defense, and he knew from Etienne's face that it would last only moments. The sword was twelve inches longer, lighter and faster.

His only chance was to throw the candlestick. Yet once it was out of his hands he had nothing left. He must work his way round until he could snatch the other sword. But if that was obvious to him, then it would be to Etienne also.

He picked up a light chair with his other hand, and threw it. It barely interrupted Etienne's balance, but it did bring Sebastien a yard nearer to the wall and the sword.

"You're wasting your time, Sebastien," Etienne said quietly, but for all the lightness of his voice, there was pain in it. He would not have had it come to this, but when he had to choose between himself and another, then it would always be himself. "I'm a better swordsman than you'll ever be. I'm an aristocrat, for whatever that's worth. I was born to the saddle and the sword. Don't fight me, and I'll make it quick . . . clean."

Sebastien picked up a Sevres vase and threw it at him.

"Damn! You shouldn't have broken that, you bloody barbarian!" Etienne said with disgust. He slashed and caught Sebastien a glancing blow across the other arm, ripping his shirt and drawing another thin line of beaded blood.

Sebastien jumped over the footstool and dived for the other sword. Etienne saw what he was aiming for and leaped after him, but his foot caught the stool and he crashed down, saving himself by putting out his other hand. Had he not fallen, he would have speared Sebastien through the chest.

Sebastien tore the weapon off its mounting and faced him just as he rose to his feet again. The blades clashed, crossed, withdrew, and clashed again. They swayed back and forth, dodging the furniture, first one slipping, then the other. Sebastien was stronger and he had the longer reach, but Etienne had by far the greater skill. It could only be a matter of time until he saw the fatal advantage, and Sebastien knew it.

There had been far too much death already. Paris was reeking with death and the fear of death. There was so much that was

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good in Etienne, far more than in many that were still alive. He had courage, gaiety, imagination, the gift for inspiring others to give of their best, to rise above what they had thought they were and find new heights.

Then Sebastien again saw in his mind's eye the surge of hope in de Fleury's face when he knew why they had come to La Force, the gratitude, and then the surprise of death as he knew he was betrayed.

He stepped back and with all his strength tore one of the tapestries off the wall and threw it at Etienne. Etienne swore, as much for the damage of the fabric as anything else. He ducked so that it did not entangle him, and at the same moment Sebastien lunged forward and sideways and his blade sank deep into flesh. Etienne fell, taking the sword with him, blood staining his shirt in a dark tide.

Sebastien stood still, looking down at him. There was surprise in his victory, and no pleasure at all, not even any satisfaction. Etienne was dead with the single thrust.

Sebastien pulled out the blade and let it fall towards the body. He felt empty except for an overwhelming sadness, a heaviness inside him as if he could hardly carry his own weight.

As he had with de Fleury the night before, he bent to the body, only this was different, this was a man who had been his friend, a man he himself had killed. He wanted to say something, but all that filled his mind was "Why?" Why would a man like Etienne have shot de Fleury? Why could he not have told Sebastien, if de Fleury were some bitter enemy from the past?

Then he saw the paper in Etienne's pocket, just a small edge poking out. He pulled it, then opened it up. It was a large sheet of high-quality vellum, written in a copperplate hand. It appeared to be a legal document, but quite short, taking up only two thirds of the page. After it were several signatures.

He began to read:

> Versailles, 5th June, 1785.
>
> I, Maximilien Honoré de Fleury, Vicomte de Lauzun, do herewith offer myself and all I have in solemn covenant with Satan, Lord of Darkness and of Lies, Master of Destruction, King of the Nether World, and Heir Apparent of this Earth and all that is in it, that I may be of service to him, in the seduction of innocence, the indulgence of appetite, the sacrifice of human flesh

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to his will, and the bending of minds to his dominion. For my loyalty to his cause he will reward me with pleasure and riches here, endless sensation and variety, and hereafter a place among the Lords of his Kingdom.

I pledge my soul to this cause, and write my name in my own blood . . . Maximilien Honoré de Fleury.

In witness to this covenant we fellow servants of his Satanic Majesty do sign our names beneath:

Jean Sylvain Marie Dessalines
Jean Marie Victor Coritot
Stanislas Marie Delabarre
Donatien Royou
Joseph Augustin Barère
Etienne Jacques Marie du Bac
Ignace Georges Legendre

He stared at the page, unable to believe it. Etienne had been witness to this grotesque piece of . . . of what? Did these men really believe they had made a pact with the devil? Perhaps in 1785 it had seemed some kind of effete joke. Now no one joked about the devil, he was only too real. The stench of his breath was everywhere and the mark of his hand shrivelled the heart.

People had turned on each other, killing and being killed. That Etienne, of all people, ironic, graceful, and brave, should have taken de Fleury's life to protect this grubby secret was tragic above all. If he had told Sebastien about it, Sebastien would have taken the paper from de Fleury, and made him promise on his life to keep silence. He could hardly tell his hosts in England of Etienne's complicity without exposing his own, and destroying his welcome also.

Sebastien shivered, cold through to his bones. Perhaps that was how pacts with the devil worked—you lost sight of the stupidity of evil, and the ultimate sanity of good. You destroyed yourself—unnecessarily.

He put the letter in his pocket. He would burn it when he got home. He turned round and went out of the door and closed it softly behind him. ●

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Out There In the Darkness

by Ed Gorman

The night it all started, the whole strange spiral, we were having our usual mid-week poker game—four forty-ish men who work in the financial business getting together for beer and bawdy jokes and straight poker. No wild-card games. We hate them.

This was summer, and vacation time, and so it happened that the game was held two weeks in a row at my house. Jan had taken the kids to see her Aunt Wendy and Uncle Verne at their fishing cabin, and so I offered to have the game at my house this week, too. With nobody there to supervise, the beer could be laced with a little bourbon, and the jokes could get even bawdier. With the wife and kids in the house, you're always at least a little bit intimidated.

Mike and Bob arrived together, bearing gifts, which in this case meant the kind of sexy magazines our wives did not want in the house in case the kids might stumble across them. At least that's what they say. I think they sense, and rightly, that the magazines

A number of *EQMM* stories have been optioned for, and eventually turned into, movies. "Out There in the Darkness" was seen in Hollywood even before it reached the offices of *EQMM*, and the author has just completed a screenplay for Academy Award-nominated director Juan Campanella. Filming, by Sony Entertainment, begins in January '96. The story appears in a collection with other Gorman shorts, *Moonchasers and Other Stories*, coming from Forge this spring. ¶

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might give their spouses bad ideas about taking the secretary out for a few after-work drinks, or stopping by a singles bar some night.

We got the chips and cards set up at the table, we got the first beers open (Mike chasing a shot of bourbon with his beer), and we started passing the dirty magazines around with tenth-grade glee. The magazines compensated, I suppose, for the balding head, the bloating belly, the stooping shoulders. Deep in the heart of every hundred-year-old man is a horny fourteen-year-old boy.

All this, by the way, took place up in the attic. The four of us got to know each other when we all moved into what city planners called a "transitional neighborhood." There were some grand old houses that could be renovated with enough money and real care. The city designated a ten-square-block area as one it wanted to restore to shiny new luster. Jan and I chose a crumbling Victorian. You wouldn't recognize it today. And that includes the attic, which I've turned into a very nice den.

"Ticks me off," Mike O'Brien said. "He's always late."

And that was true. Neil Solomon *was* always late. Never by that much but always late nonetheless.

"At least tonight he has a good excuse," Bob Genter said.

"He does?" Mike said. "He's probably swimming in his pool." Neil recently got a bonus that made him the first owner of a full-size outdoor pool in our neighborhood.

"No, he's got patrol. But he's stopping at nine. He's got somebody trading with him for next week."

"Oh, hell," Mike said, obviously sorry that he'd complained. "I didn't know that."

Bob's handsome black head nodded solemnly.

Patrol is something we all take very seriously in this newly restored "transitional neighborhood." Eight months ago, the burglaries started, and they've gotten pretty bad. My house has been burglarized once and vandalized once. Bob and Mike have had curb-sitting cars stolen. Neil's wife Sheila was surprised in her own kitchen by a burglar. And then there was the killing four months ago, man and wife who'd just moved into the neighborhood savagely stabbed to death in their own bed. The police caught the guy a few days later trying to cash some of the traveler's checks he'd stolen after killing his prey. He was typical of the kind of man who infested this neighborhood after sundown: a twentyish junkie stoned to the point of psychosis on various street

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drugs, and not at all averse to murdering people he envied and despised. He also knew a hell of a lot about fooling burglar alarms.

After the murders there was a neighborhood meeting and that's when we came up with the patrol, something somebody'd read about being popular back East. People think that a nice middle-sized Midwestern city like ours doesn't have major crime problems. I invite them to walk many of these streets after dark. They'll quickly be disabused of that notion. Anyway, the patrol worked this way: Each night, two neighborhood people got in the family van and patrolled the ten-block area that had been restored. If they saw anything suspicious, they used their cellular phones and called police. We jokingly called it the Baby Boomer Brigade. The patrol had one strict rule: You were never to take direct action unless somebody's life was at stake. Always, always use the cellular phone and call the police.

Neil had patrol tonight. He'd be rolling in here in another half-hour. The patrol had two shifts: early, 8-10; late, 10-12.

"Hi, Aaron. Sorry I'm late," Neil Solomon said as he came inside and followed me up to the attic.

"We already drank all the beer," Mike O'Brien said loudly.

Neil smiled. "That gut you're carrying lately, I can believe that *you* drank all the beer."

Neil sat down, I got him a beer from the tiny fridge I keep up here, cards were dealt, seven-card stud was played.

Bob said, "How'd patrol go tonight?"

Neil shrugged. "No problems."

"I still say we should carry guns," Mike said.

"You're not going to believe this, but I agree with you," Neil said.

"Seriously?" Mike said.

"Oh, great," I said to Bob Genter. "Another beer-commercial cowboy."

Bob smiled. "Where I come from we didn't have cowboys, we had 'mothas.'" He laughed. "Mean mothas, let me tell you. And practically *all* of them carried guns."

"That mean you're siding with them?" I said.

Bob looked at his cards again then shrugged. "Haven't decided yet, I guess."

"Play cards," Mike said, "and leave the debate crap till later."

Good idea.

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We played cards.

In forty-five minutes, I lost $63.82. Mike and Neil always played as if their lives were at stake. All you had to do was watch their faces. Gunfighters couldn't have looked more serious or determined.

The first pit stop came just after ten o'clock and Neil took it. There was a john on the second floor between the bedrooms, and another john on the first floor.

Neil said, "The good Doctor Gottesfeld had to give me a finger-wave this afternoon, gents, so this may take awhile."

"You should trade that prostate of yours in for a new one," Mike said.

"Believe me, I'd like to."

While Neil was gone, the three of us started talking about the patrol again, and whether we should go armed.

We made the same old arguments. The passion was gone. We were just marking time waiting for Neil and we knew it.

"Guess I'll use the john on the first floor," Bob said, and disappeared downstairs.

The first time I heard it, I thought it was some kind of animal noise from outside, a dog or a cat in some kind of discomfort maybe. Mike, who was dealing himself a hand of solitaire, didn't even look up from his cards. This was about ten minutes after Bob left for downstairs.

But the second time I heard the sound, Mike and I both looked up. And then we heard the exploding sound of breaking glass.

"What the hell is that?" Mike said.

"Let's go find out."

Just about the time we reached the bottom of the attic steps, we saw Neil coming out of the second-floor john. "You hear that?"

"Sure as hell did," I said.

We reached the staircase leading to the first floor. Everything was dark. Mike reached for the light switch but I brushed his hand away.

I put a shushing finger to my lips and then showed him the Louisville Slugger I'd grabbed from Tim's room. He's my nine-year-old and his most devout wish is to be a good baseball player. His mother has convinced him that just because I went to college on a baseball scholarship, I was a good player. I wasn't. I was a lucky player.

I led the way downstairs, keeping the bat ready at all times.

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"Damn you!"

The voice belonged to Bob.

More smashing glass.

I listened to the passage of the sound. Kitchen. Had to be the kitchen.

In the shadowy light from the street, I saw their faces, Mike's and Neil's. They looked scared.

I hefted the bat some more and then started moving fast to the kitchen.

Just as we passed through the dining room, I heard something heavy hit the kitchen floor. Something human and heavy.

I got the kitchen light on.

He was at the back door. White. Tall. Blond shoulder-length hair. Filthy tan T-shirt. Greasy jeans. He had grabbed one of Jan's carving knives from the huge iron rack that sits atop the butcher-block island. The one curious thing about him was the eyes: There was a malevolent iridescence to the blue irises, an angry but somehow alien intelligence, a silver glow.

Bob was sprawled facedown on the tile floor. His arms were spread wide on either side of him. He didn't seem to be moving. Chunks and fragments of glass were strewn everywhere across the floor. My uninvited guest had smashed two or three of the colorful pitchers we'd bought the winter before in Mexico.

"Run!" the burglar cried to somebody on the back porch.

He turned, waving the butcher knife back and forth to keep us at bay.

Footsteps out the back door.

The burglar held us off a few more moments, but then I gave him a little bit of tempered Louisville Slugger wood right across the wrist. The knife went clattering.

By this time, Mike and Neil were pretty crazed. They jumped him, hurled him back against the door, and then started putting in punches wherever they'd fit.

"Hey!" I said, and tossed Neil the bat. "Just hold this. If he makes a move, open up his head. Otherwise leave him alone."

They really were crazed, like pit bulls who'd been pulled back just as a fight was starting to get good.

"Mike, call the cops and tell them to send a car."

I got Bob up and walking. I took him into the bathroom and sat him down on the toilet lid. I found a lump the size of an egg on the back of his head. I soaked a clean washcloth with cold water and

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pressed it against the lump. Bob took it from there.

"You want an ambulance?" I said.

"An ambulance? Are you kidding? You must think I'm a ballet dancer or something."

I shook my head. "No, I know better than that. I've got a male cousin who's a ballet dancer and he's one tough sonofabitch, believe me. You—" I smiled. "You aren't that tough, Bob."

"I don't need an ambulance. I'm fine."

He winced and tamped the rag tighter against his head. "Just a little headache is all." He looked young suddenly, the aftershock of fear in his brown eyes. "Scared the hell out of me. Heard something when I was leaving the john. Went out to the kitchen to check it out. He jumped me."

"What'd he hit you with?"

"No idea."

"I'll go get you some whiskey. Just sit tight."

"I love sitting in bathrooms, man."

I laughed. "I don't blame you."

When I got back to the kitchen, they were gone. All three of them. Then I saw the basement door. It stood open a few inches. I could see dusty light in the space between door and frame. The basement was our wilderness. We hadn't had the time or money to really fix it up yet. We were counting on this year's Christmas bonus from the Windsor Financial Group to help us set it right.

I went down the stairs. The basement is one big, mostly unused room except for the washer and dryer in the corner. All the boxes and odds and ends that should have gone to the attic instead went down here. It smells damp most of the time. The idea is to turn it into a family room for when the boys are older. These days it's mostly inhabited by stray waterbugs.

When I reached the bottom step, I saw them. There are four metal support poles in the basement, near each corner. They had him lashed to a pole in the east quadrant, tied his wrists behind him with rope found in the tool room. They also had him gagged with what looked like a pillowcase. His eyes were big and wide. He looked scared and I didn't blame him. I was scared, too.

"What the hell are you guys doing?"

"Just calm down, Papa Bear," Mike said. That's his name for me whenever he wants to convey to people that I'm kind of this old fuddy-duddy. It so happens that Mike is two years older than I am and it also happens that I'm not a fuddy-duddy. Jan has assured

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me of that, and she's completely impartial.

"Knock off the Papa Bear crap. Did you call the cops?"

"Not yet," Neil said. "Just calm down a little, all right?"

"You haven't called the cops. You've got some guy tied up and gagged in my basement. You haven't even asked how Bob is. And you want me to calm down."

Mike came up to me then. He still had that air of pit-bull craziness about him, frantic, uncontrollable, alien.

"We're going to do what the cops *can't* do, man," he said. "We're going to sweat this jerk. We're going to make him tell us who he was with tonight, and then we're going to make him give us every single name of every single bad guy who works this neighborhood. And then we'll turn all the names over to the cops."

"It's just an extension of the patrol," Neil said. "Just keeping our neighborhood safe is all."

"You guys are nuts," I said, and turned back toward the steps. "I'm going up and call the cops."

That's when I realized just how crazed Mike was. "You aren't going anywhere, man. You're going to stay here and help us break this creep down. You're going to do your neighborhood duty."

He'd grabbed my sleeve so hard that he'd torn it at the shoulder. We both discovered this at the same time.

I expected him to look sorry. He didn't. "Don't be such a wimp, Aaron," he said.

I looked over at the prisoner and said, "Let's go upstairs and talk this over."

2.

Once we were back upstairs Mike calmed down a little. He even led the charge at getting the kitchen cleaned up. I think he was feeling guilty about calling me a wimp with such angry exuberance. Now I understood how lynch mobs got formed. One guy like Mike stirring people up by alternately insulting them and urging them on.

After the kitchen was put back in order, and after I'd taken inventory to find that nothing had been stolen, I went to the refrigerator and got beers for everybody. Bob had drifted back to the kitchen, too.

"All right," I said, "now that we've all calmed down, I want to walk over to that yellow kitchen wall phone there and call the police. Any objections?"

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"I think blue would look better in here than yellow," Neil said.

"Funny," I said.

They looked themselves now, no feral madness on the faces of Mike or Neil, no winces on Bob's.

I started across the floor to the phone.

Neil grabbed my arm. Not with the same insulting force Mike had used on me. But enough to get the job done.

"I think Mike's right," Neil said. "We should grill him a little."

I shook my head, politely removed his hand from my forearm, and proceeded to the phone.

"This isn't your decision alone," Mike said.

He'd finally had his way. He'd succeeded in making me angry. I turned around and looked at him. "This is my house, Mike. If you don't like my decisions, then I'd suggest you leave."

We both took steps toward each other. Mike would no doubt win any battle we had but I'd at least be able to inflict a little damage, and right now that's all I was thinking about.

Neil got between us.

"Hey," he said. "For God's sake, you two, c'mon. We're friends, remember?"

"This is my house," I said, my words childish in my ears.

"Yeah, but we live in the same neighborhood, Aaron," Mike said, "which makes this *our* problem."

"He's right, Aaron," Bob said from the breakfast nook.

"He's not right," I said to Bob. "He's wrong. We're not cops, we're not bounty hunters, we're not trackers. We're a bunch of guys who peddle stocks and bonds. Mike and Neil shouldn't have tied him up downstairs—that happens to be illegal, at least the way they went about it—and now I'm going to call the cops."

"Yes, that poor thing," Mike said, "aren't we just picking on him, though? Tell you what, why don't we make him something to eat?"

"Just make sure we have the right wine to go with it," Neil said. "Properly chilled, of course."

"Maybe we could get him a chick," Bob said.

"With bombers out to here," Mike said, indicating with his hands where "here" was.

I couldn't help it. I smiled. They were all being ridiculous. A kind of fever had caught them. "You really want to go down there and question him?" I said to Neil.

"Yes. We can ask him things the cops can't."

"Scare him a little," Mike said. "So he'll tell us who was with

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him tonight, and who else works this neighborhood." He came over and put his hand out. "God, man, you're one of my best friends. I don't want you mad at me."

Then he hugged me, which is something I've never been comfortable with men doing, but to the extent I could, I hugged him back.

"Friends?" he said.

"Friends," I said. "But I still want to call the cops."

"And spoil our fun?" Neil said.

"And spoil your fun."

"I say we take it to a vote," Bob said.

"This isn't a democracy," I said. "It's my house and I'm the king. I don't want to have a vote."

"Can we ask him one question?" Bob said.

I sighed. They weren't going to let go. "One question?"

"The name of the guy he was with tonight."

"And that's it?"

"That's it. That way we get two of them off the street."

"And then I call the cops?"

"Then," Mike said, "you call the cops."

"One question," Neil said.

While we finished our beers, we argued a little more, but they had a lot more spirit left than I did. I was tired now and missing Jan and the kids and feeling lonely. These three guys had become strangers to me tonight. Very old boys eager to play at boy games once again.

"One question," I said. "Then I call the cops."

I led the way down, sneezing as I did so. There's always enough dust floating around in the basement to play hell with my sinuses.

The guy was his same sullen self, glaring at us as we descended the stairs and then walked over to him. He smelled of heat and sweat and city grime. The long bare arms sticking out of his filthy T-shirt told tattoo tales of writhing snakes and leaping panthers. The arms were joined in the back with rope. His jaw still flexed, trying to accommodate the intrusion of the gag.

"Maybe we should castrate him," Mike said, walking up close to the guy. "You like that, scumbag? If we castrated you?"

If the guy felt any fear, it wasn't evident in his eyes. All you could see there was the usual contempt.

"I'll bet this is the jerk who broke into the Donaldson's house a couple weeks ago," Neil said.

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Now he walked up to the guy. But he was more ambitious than Mike had been. Neil spat in the guy's face.

"Hey," I said, "cool it."

Neil glared at me. "Yeah, I wouldn't want to hurt his feelings, would I?"

Then he suddenly turned back on the guy, raised his fist, and started to swing. All I could do was shove him. That sent his punch angling off to the right, missing our burglar by half a foot.

"You punk," Neil said, turning back on me now.

But Mike was there, between us.

"You know what we're doing? We're making this jerk happy. He's gonna have some nice stories to tell all his criminal friends."

He was right. The burglar was the one who got to look all cool and composed. We looked like squabbling brats. As if to confirm this, a hint of amusement played in the burglar's blue eyes.

"Oh, hell, Aaron, I'm sorry," Neil said, putting his hand out. This was like a political convention, all the handshaking going on.

"So am I, Neil," I said. "That's why I want to call the cops and get this over with."

And that's when he chose to make his move, the burglar. As soon as I mentioned the cops, he probably realized that this was going to be his last opportunity.

He waited until we were just finishing up with the handshake, when we were all focused on each other. Then he took off running. We could see that he'd slipped the rope. He went straight for the stairs, angling out around us like a running back seeing daylight. He even stuck his long, tattoed arm out as if he were trying to repel a tackle.

"Hey," Bob shouted. "He's getting away."

He was at the stairs by the time we could gather ourselves enough to go after him. But when we moved, we moved fast, and in virtual unison.

By the time I got my hand on the cuff of his left jean, he was close enough to the basement door to open it.

I yanked hard and ducked out of the way of his kicking foot. By now I was as crazy as Mike and Neil had been earlier. There was adrenaline, and great anger. He wasn't just a burglar, he was all burglars, intent not merely on stealing things from me, but hurting my family, too. He hadn't had time to take the gag from his mouth.

This time, I grabbed booted foot and leg and started hauling

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him back down the stairs. At first he was able to hold onto the door but when I wrenched his foot rightward, he tried to scream behind the gag. He let go of the doorknob.

The next half-minute is still unclear in my mind. I started running down the stairs, dragging him with me. All I wanted to do was get him on the basement floor again, turn him over to the others to watch, and then go call the cops.

But somewhere in those few seconds when I was hauling him back down the steps, I heard edge of stair meeting back of skull. The others heard it, too, because their shouts and curses died in their throats.

When I turned around, I saw the blood running fast and red from his nose. The blue eyes no longer held contempt. They were starting to roll up white in the back of his head.

"God," I said. "He's hurt."

"I think he's a lot more than hurt," Mike said.

"Help me carry him upstairs."

We got him on the kitchen floor. Mike and Neil rushed around soaking paper towels. We tried to revive him. Bob, who kept wincing from his headache, tried the guy's wrist, ankle, and throat for a pulse. None. His nose and mouth were bloody. Very bloody.

"No way you could *die* from hitting your head like that," Neil said.

"Sure you could," Mike said. "You hit it just the right way."

"He can't be dead," Neil said. "I'm going to try his pulse again."

Bob, who obviously took Neil's second opinion personally, frowned and rolled his eyes. "He's dead, man. He really is."

"No way."

"You a doctor or something?" Bob said.

Neil smiled nervously. "No, but I play one on TV."

So Neil tried the pulse points. His reading was exactly what Bob's reading had been.

"See," Bob said.

I guess none of us was destined to ever quite be an adult.

"Man," Neil said, looking down at the long, cold, unmoving form of the burglar. "He's really dead."

"What the hell're we gonna do?" Mike said.

"We're going to call the police," I said, and started for the phone.

"The hell we are," Mike said. "The hell we are."

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3.

Maybe half an hour after we laid him on the kitchen floor, he started to smell. We'd looked for identification, and found none. He was just The Burglar.

We sat at the kitchen table, sharing a fifth of Old Grandad.

We'd taken two votes and they'd come up ties. Two for calling the police, Bob and I; two for not calling the police, Mike and Neil.

"All we have to tell them," I said, "is that we tied him up so he wouldn't get away."

"And then they say," Mike said, "so why didn't you call us before now?"

"We just lie about the time a little," I said. "Tell them we called them within twenty minutes."

"Won't work," Neil said.

"Why not?" Bob said.

"Medical examiner can fix the time of death," Neil said.

"Not that close."

"Close enough so that the cops might question our story," Neil said. "By the time they get here, he'll have been dead at least an hour, hour and a half."

"And then we get our names in the paper for not reporting the burglary or the death right away," Mike said. "Brokerages just love publicity like that."

"I'm calling the cops right now," I said, and got up from the table.

"Think about Tomlinson a minute," Neil said.

Tomlinson was my boss at the brokerage house. "What about him?"

"Remember how he canned Dennis Bryce when Bryce's ex-wife took out a restraining order on him?"

"This is different," I said.

"The hell it is," Mike said. "Neil's right, none of our bosses will like publicity like this. We'll all sound a little—crazy—you know, keeping him locked up in the basement. And then killing him when he tried to get away."

They all looked at me.

"You jerks," I said. "I was the one who wanted to call the police in the first place. And I sure as hell didn't kill him on purpose."

"Looking back on it," Neil said, "I guess you were right, Aaron. We should've called the cops right away."

"Now's a great time to realize that," I said.

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"Maybe they've got a point," Bob said softly, glancing at me, then glancing nervously away.

"Oh, great. You, too?" I said.

"They just might kick me out of there if I had any publicity that involved somebody getting killed," Bob said.

"He was a frigging burglar," I said.

"But he's dead," Neil said.

"And we killed him," Mike said.

"I appreciate your saying 'we,'" I said.

"I know a good place," Bob said.

I looked at him carefully, afraid of what he was going to say next.

"Forget it," I said.

"A good place for what?" Neil said.

"Dumping the body," Bob said.

"No way," I said.

This time when I got up, nobody tried to stop me. I walked over to the yellow wall telephone.

I wondered if the cozy kitchen would ever feel the same to me now that a dead body had been laid upon its floor.

I had to step over him to reach the phone. The smell was even more sour now.

"You know how many bodies get dumped in the river that never wash up?" Bob said.

"No," I said, "and you don't either."

"Lots," he said.

"There's a scientific appraisal for you. 'Lots.'"

"Lots and lots, probably," Neil said, taking up Bob's argument.

Mike grinned. "Lots and lots and *lots.*"

"Thank you, professor," I said.

I lifted the receiver and dialed O.

"Operator."

"The police department, please."

"Is this an emergency?" asked the young woman.

"No; no, it isn't."

"I'll connect you," she said.

"You think your kids'll be able to handle it?" Neil said.

"No mind games," I said.

"No mind games at all. I'm asking you a realistic question. The police have some doubts about our story and then the press gets ahold of it and bam. We're the lead story on all three channels."

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"Good evening. Police Department."

I started to speak but I couldn't somehow. My voice wouldn't work. That's the only way I can explain it.

"The six o'clock news five nights running," Neil said softly behind me. "And the D.A. can't endorse any kind of vigilante activity so he nails us on involuntary manslaughter."

"Hello? This is the police department," a female voice said.

Neil was there then, reaching me as if by magic.

He took the receiver gently from my hand and hung it back up on the phone again.

"Let's go have another drink and see what Bob's got in mind, all right?"

He led me, as if I were a hospital patient, slowly and carefully back to the table where Bob, over more whiskey, slowly and gently laid out his plan.

The next morning, three of us phoned in sick. Bob went to work because he had an important meeting.

Around noon—a sunny day when a softball game and a cold six-pack of beer sounded good — Neil and Mike came over. They looked as bad as I felt, and no doubt looked, myself.

We sat out on the patio eating the Hardee's lunch they'd bought. I'd need to play softball to work off some of the calories.

Birdsong and soft breezes and the smell of fresh-cut grass should have made our patio time enjoyable. But I had to wonder if we'd ever enjoy anything again. I just kept seeing the body momentarily arced over the roaring waters of the dam and dropping into white churning turbulence.

"You think we did the right thing?" Neil said.

"Now's a hell of a time to ask that," I said.

"Of course we did the right thing," Mike said. "What choice did we have? It was either that or get arrested."

"So you don't have any regrets?" Neil said.

Mike sighed. "I didn't say that. I mean, I wish it hadn't happened in the first place."

"Maybe Aaron was right all along," Neil said.

"About what?"

"About going to the cops."

"God damn," Mike said, sitting up from his slouch. We all wore button-down shirts without ties and with the sleeves rolled up. Somehow there was something profane about wearing shorts and

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T-shirts on a workday. We even wore pretty good slacks. We were those kind of people. "God damn."

"Here he goes," Neil said.

"I can't believe you two," Mike said. "We should be happy that everything went so well last night — and what are we doing? Sitting around here griping and moaning."

"That doesn't mean it's over," I said.

"Why not?" Mike said.

"Because there's still one left."

"One what?"

"One burglar."

"So?"

"So you don't think he's going to get curious about what happened to his partner?"

"What's he gonna do?" Mike said. "Go to the cops?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? You're crazy. He goes to the cops, he'd be setting himself up for a robbery conviction."

"Not if he tells them we murdered his pal."

Neil said, "Aaron's got a point. What if this guy goes to the cops?"

"He's not going to the cops," Mike said. "No way he's going to the cops at all."

4.

I was dozing on the couch, a Cubs game on the TV set, when the phone rang around nine that evening. I hadn't heard from Jan yet so I expected it would be her. Whenever we're apart, we call each other at least once a day.

The phone machine picks up on the fourth ring so I had to scramble to beat it.

"Hello?"

Nothing. But somebody was on the line. Listening.

"Hello?"

I never play games with silent callers. I just hang up. I did so now.

Two innings later, having talked to Jan, made myself a tuna-fish sandwich on rye, found a package of potato chips I thought we'd finished off at the poker game, and gotten myself a new can of beer, I sat down to watch the last inning. The Cubs had a chance of winning. I said a silent prayer to the god of baseball.

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The phone rang.

I mouthed several curses around my mouthful of tuna sandwich and went to the phone.

"Hello?" I said, trying to swallow the last of the bite.

My silent friend again.

I slammed down the phone.

The Cubs got two more singles, I started on the chips, and I had polished off the beer and was thinking of getting another one when the phone rang again.

I had a suspicion of who was calling and then saying nothing—but I didn't really want to think about it.

Then I decided there was an easy way to handle this situation. I'd just let the phone machine take it. If my anonymous friend wanted to talk to a phone machine, good for him.

Four rings. The phone machine took over, Jan's pleasant voice saying that we weren't home but would be happy to call you back if you'd just leave your number.

I waited to hear dead air and then a click.

Instead a familiar female voice said: "Aaron, it's Louise. Bob—" Louise was Bob's wife. She was crying. I ran from the couch to the phone machine in the hall.

"Hello, Louise. It's Aaron."

"Oh, Aaron. It's terrible."

"What happened, Louise?"

"Bob—" More tears. "He electrocuted himself tonight out in the garage." She said that a plug had accidentally fallen into a bowl of water, according to the fire captain on the scene, and Bob hadn't noticed this and put the plug into the outlet and—

Bob had a woodcraft workshop in his garage, a large and sophisticated one. He knew what he was doing.

"He's dead, Aaron. He's dead."

"Oh God, Louise. I'm sorry."

"He was so careful with electricity, too. It's just so hard to believe—"

Yes, I thought. Yes, it was hard to believe. I thought of last night. Of the burglars—one who'd died. One who'd gotten away.

"Why don't I come over?"

"Oh, thank you, Aaron, but I need to be alone with the children. But if you could call Neil and Mike—"

"Of course."

"Thanks for being such good friends, you and Jan."

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"Don't be silly, Louise. The pleasure's ours."

"I'll talk to you tomorrow. When I'm—you know."

"Goodnight, Louise."

Mike and Neil were at my place within twenty minutes. We sat in the kitchen again, where we'd been last night.

I said, "Either of you get any weird phone calls tonight?"

"You mean just silence?" Neil said.

"Right."

"I did," Mike said. "Carrie was afraid it was that pervert who called all last winter."

"I did, too," Neil said. "Three of them."

"Then a little while ago, Bob dies out in his garage," I said. "Some coincidence."

"Hey, Aaron," Mike said. "Is that why you got us over here? Because you don't think it was an accident?"

"I'm sure it wasn't an accident," I said. "Bob knew what he was doing with his tools. He didn't notice a plug that had fallen into a bowl of water?"

"He's coming after us," Neil said.

"Oh God," Mike said. "Not you, too."

"He calls us, gets us on edge," I said. "And then he kills Bob. Making it look like an accident."

"These are pretty bright people," Mike said sarcastically.

"You notice the burglar's eyes?" Neil said.

"I did," I said. "He looked very bright."

"And spooky," Neil said. "Never saw eyes like that before."

"I can shoot your theory right in the butt," Mike said.

"How?" I said.

He leaned forward, sipped his beer.

"Here's how. There are two burglars, right? One gets caught, the other runs. And given the nature of burglars, keeps on running. He wouldn't even know who was in the house last night, except for Aaron, and that's only because he's the owner and his name would be in the phone book. But he wouldn't know anything about Bob or Neil or me. No way he'd have been able to track down Bob."

I shook my head. "You're overlooking the obvious."

"Like what?"

"Like he runs off last night, gets his car, and then parks in the alley to see what's going to happen."

"Right," Neil said. "Then he sees us bringing his friend out

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wrapped in a blanket. He follows us to the dam and watches us throw his friend in."

"And," I said, "everybody had his car here last night. Very easy for him to write down all the license numbers."

"So he kills Bob," Neil said. "And starts making the phone calls to shake us up."

"Does that mean he's coming after us?" Mike said.

"Hell, yes," Neil said. "That's why he's calling us. Shake us up. Sweat us out. Let us know that he's out there somewhere, just waiting. And that we're next."

"I'm going to follow you to work tomorrow, Neil," I said. "And Mike's going to be with me. And then on Saturday you and Neil can follow me. If he's following *us* around, then we'll see it. And then we can start following him. We'll at least find out who he is."

"And then what?" Mike said. "Suppose we do find out where he lives? Then what the hell do we do?"

Neil said, "I guess we worry about that when we get there, don't we?"

In the morning, I picked Mike up early. As agreed, we parked half a block from Neil's house. Also as agreed, Neil emerged exactly at 7:35. Kids were already in the wide streets on skateboards and rollerblades. No other car could be seen, except for a lone silver BMW in a driveway far down the block.

We followed him all the way to work. Nobody followed him. Nobody.

When I dropped Mike off at his office, he said, "You owe me an hour's sleep."

"Two hours," I said.

"Huh?"

"Tomorrow, you and Neil follow me around."

"No way," he said.

There are times when only blunt anger will work with Mike. "It was your idea not to call the police, remember? I'm not up for any of your sulking, Mike. I'm really not."

He sighed: "I guess you're right."

I drove for two and a half hours Saturday morning. I hit a hardware store, a lumberyard, and a Kmart. At noon, I pulled into a McDonald's. The three of us had some lunch.

"You didn't see anybody even suspicious?"

"Not even suspicious, Aaron," Neil said. "I'm sorry."

"This is all bullshit. He's not going to follow us around."

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"I want to give it one more chance," I said.

Mike made a face. "I'm not going to get up early, if that's what you've got in mind."

I got angry again. "Bob's dead, or have you forgotten?"

"Yeah, Aaron," Mike said, "Bob *is* dead. He got electrocuted. Accidentally."

I said, "You really think it was an accident?"

"Of course I do," Mike said. "When do you want to try it again?"

"Tonight. I'll do a little bowling."

"There's a fight on I want to watch," Mike said.

"Tape it," I said.

" 'Tape it,' " he mocked. "Since when did you start giving us orders?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Mike, grow up," Neil said. "There's no way that Bob's electrocution was an accident or a coincidence. He's probably not going to stop with Bob, either."

The bowling alley was mostly teenagers on Saturday night. There was a time when bowling was mostly a working-class sport. Now it's come to the suburbs and the white-collar people. Now the bowling lane is a good place for teenaged boys to meet girls.

I bowled two games, drank three beers, and walked back outside an hour later.

Summer night. Smell of dying heat, car exhaust, cigarette smoke, perfume. Sound of jukebox, distant loud mufflers, even more distant rushing train, lonely baying dogs.

Mike and Neil were gone.

I went home and opened a beer.

The phone rang. Once again, I was expecting Jan.

"Found the jerk," Neil said. "He followed you from your house to the bowling alley. Then he got tired of waiting and took off again. This time we followed *him.*"

"Where?"

He gave me an address. It wasn't a good one.

"We're waiting for you to get here. Then we're going up to pay him a little visit."

"I need twenty minutes."

"Hurry."

Not even the silver touch of moonlight lent these blocks of crumbling stucco apartment houses any majesty or beauty. The rats didn't even bother to hide. They squatted red-eyed on the unmown

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lawns amidst beer cans and broken bottles and wrappers from Taco John's. And used condoms that looked like deflated mushrooms.

Mike stood behind a tree.

"I followed him around back," he said. "He went up the fire escape on the back. Then he jumped on this veranda. He's in the back apartment on the right side. Neil's in the backyard, watching for him."

Mike looked down at my ball bat. "That's a nice complement," he said. Then he showed me his handgun. "To this."

"Why the hell did you bring that?"

"Are you kidding? You're the one who said he killed Bob."

That, I couldn't argue with.

"All right," I said, "but what happens when we catch him?"

"We tell him to lay off us," Mike said.

"We need to go to the cops."

"Oh, sure. Sure we do." He shook his head. He looked as if he was dealing with a child. A very slow one. "Aaron, going to the cops now won't bring Bob back. And it's only going to get us in trouble."

That's when we heard the shout. Neil; sounded like Neil.

Maybe five feet of rust-colored grass separated us from the alley that ran along the west side of the apartment house.

We ran down the alley, having to hop over an ancient drooping picket fence to reach the backyard where Neil lay sprawled, face down, next to a twenty-year-old Chevrolet that was tireless and up on blocks. Through the windshield, you could see the huge gouges in the seats where the rats had eaten their fill.

The backyard smelled of dog feces and car oil.

Neil was moaning. At least we knew he was alive.

"The punk," he said, when we got him to his feet. "I moved over to the other side, back of the car, so he wouldn't see me if he tried to come down that fire escape. I didn't figure there was another fire escape on the side of the building. He must've come around there and snuck up on me. He tried to kill me but I had this—"

In the moonlight, his wrist and the switchblade knife he held in his fingers were wet and dark with blood. "I got him a couple of times in the arm. Otherwise, I'd be dead."

"We're going up there," Mike said.

"How about checking Neil first?"

"I'm fine," Neil said. "A little headache from where he caught me

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on the back of the neck." He waved his bloody blade. "Good thing I had this."

The landlord was on the first floor. He wore Bermuda shorts and no shirt. He looked eleven or twelve months pregnant and had enough coarse black hair to knit a sweater with. He had a plastic-tipped cigarillo in the left corner of his mouth.

"Yeah?"

"Two-F," I said.

"What about it?"

"Who lives there?"

"Nobody."

"Nobody?"

"If you were the law, you'd show me a badge."

"I'll show you a badge," Mike said, making a fist.

"Hey," I said, playing good cop to his bad cop. "You just let me speak to this gentleman."

The guy seemed to like my reference to him as a gentleman. It was probably the only name he'd never been called.

"Sir, we saw somebody go up there."

"Oh," he said, "the vampires."

"Vampires?"

He sucked down some cigarillo smoke. "That's what we call 'em, the missus and me. They're street people, winos and homeless and all like that. They know that sometimes some of these apartments ain't rented for a while, so they sneak up there and spend the night."

"You don't stop them?"

"You think I'm gonna get my head split open for something like that?"

"I guess that makes sense." Then: "So nobody's renting it now?"

"Nope, it ain't been rented for three months. This fat broad lived there then. Man, did she smell. You know how fat people can smell sometimes? *She* sure smelled." He wasn't exactly svelte himself.

Back on the front lawn, trying to wend my way between the mounds of dog-doo, I said, "'Vampires.' Good name for them."

"Yeah, it is," Neil said. "I just keep thinking of the one who died. His weird eyes."

"Here we go again," Mike said. "You two guys love to scare the shit out of each other, don't you? They're a couple of nickel-and-dime crooks, and that's all they are."

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"All right if Mike and I stop and get some beer and then swing by your place?"

"Sure," I said. "Just as long as Mike buys Bud and none of that generic crap."

Neil laughed. "Oh, I forgot, he does do that when it's his turn to buy, doesn't he?"

"Yeah," I said, "he certainly does."

I was never sure what time the call came. Darkness. The ringing phone seemed part of a dream from which I couldn't escape. Somehow I managed to lift the receiver before the phone machine kicked in.

Silence. That special kind of silence.

Him. I had no doubt about it. The vampire, as the landlord had called him. The one who'd killed Bob. I didn't say so much as hello. Just listened, angry, afraid, confused.

After a few minutes, he hung up.

Darkness again; deep darkness, the quarter moon in the sky a cold golden scimitar that could cleave a head from a neck.

5.

About noon on Sunday, Jan called to tell me that she was staying a few days extra. The kids had discovered archery and there was a course at the Y they were taking and wouldn't she please please *please* ask good old Dad if they could stay. I said sure.

I called Neil and Mike to remind them that at nine tonight we were going to pay a visit to that crumbling stucco apartment house again.

Around four o'clock *Hombre* was on one of the cable channels so I had a few beers and watched Paul Newman doing the best acting of his career. At least, that was my opinion.

I was just getting ready for the shower when the phone rang.

He didn't say hello. He didn't identify himself. "Tracy call you?"

It was Neil. Tracy was Mike's wife. "Why should she call me?"

"He's dead. Mike."

"What?"

"You remember how he was always bitching about that elevator at work?"

Mike worked in a very old building. He made jokes about the antiquated elevators. But you could always tell the joke simply hid his fears. He'd gotten stuck innumerable times, and it was

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always stopping several feet short of the upcoming floor.

"He opened the door and the car wasn't there. He fell eight floors."

"Oh God."

"I don't have to tell you who did it, do I?"

"Maybe it's time—"

"I'm way ahead of you, Aaron. I'll pick you up in half an hour. Then we go to the police. You agree?"

"I agree."

Late Sunday afternoon, the second precinct parking lot is pretty empty. We'd missed the shift change. Nobody came or went.

"We ask for a detective," Neil said. He was dark-sportjacket-white-shirt-and-necktie earnest. I'd settled for an expensive blue sport shirt Jan had bought me for my last birthday.

"You know one thing we haven't considered?"

"You're not going to change my mind."

"I'm not *trying* to change your mind, Neil, I'm just saying that there's one thing we haven't considered."

He sat behind his steering wheel, his head resting on the back of his seat.

"A lawyer."

"What for?"

"Because we may go in there and say something that gets us in very deep trouble."

"No lawyers," he said. "We'd just look like we were trying to hide something from the cops."

"You sure about that?"

"I'm sure."

"You ready?" I said.

"Ready."

The interior of the police station was quiet. A muscular bald man in a dark uniform sat behind the information desk.

He said, "Help you?"

"We'd like to see a detective," I said.

"Are you reporting a crime?"

"Uh, yes."

"What sort of crime?"

I started to speak but once again lost my voice. I thought about all the reporters, about how Jan and the kids would be affected by it all. How my job would be affected. Taking a guy down to the basement and tying him up and then accidentally killing him—

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Neil said: "Vandalism."

"Vandalism?" the cop said. "You don't need a detective, then. I can just give you a form." Then he gave us a leery look, as if he sensed we'd just changed our minds about something.

"In that case, could I just take it home with me and fill it out there?" Neil said.

"Yeah, I guess." The cop still watched us carefully.

"Great."

"You sure that's what you wanted to report? Vandalism?"

"Yeah; yeah, that's exactly what we wanted to report," Neil said. "Exactly."

"Vandalism?" I said when we were back in the car.

"I don't want to talk right now."

"Well, maybe *I* want to talk."

"I just couldn't do it."

"No kidding."

He looked over at me. "You could've told him the truth. Nobody was stopping you."

I looked out the window. "Yeah, I guess I could've."

"We're going over there tonight. To the vampire's place."

"And do what?"

"Ask him how much he wants."

"How much he wants for what?" I said.

"How much he wants to forget everything. He goes on with his life, we go on with ours."

I had to admit, I'd had a similar thought myself. Neil and I didn't know how to do any of this. But the vampire did. He was good at stalking, good at harassing, good at violence.

"We don't have a lot of money to throw around."

"Maybe he won't *want* a lot of money. I mean, these guys aren't exactly sophisticated."

"They're sophisticated enough to make two murders look like accidents."

"I guess that's a point."

"I'm just not sure we should pay him anything, Neil."

"You got any better ideas?"

I didn't, actually; I didn't have any better ideas at all.

6.

I spent an hour on the phone with Jan that afternoon. The last few days I'd been pretty anxious and she'd sensed it. I had to tell

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her about their deaths. It was the only way I could explain my tense mood.

"That's awful," she said. "Their poor families."

"They're handling it better than you might think."

"Maybe I should bring the kids home early."

"No reason to, hon. I mean, realistically there isn't anything any of us can do."

"Two accidents in that short a time. It's pretty strange."

"Yeah, I guess it is. But that's how it happens sometimes."

"Are you going to be all right?"

"Just need to adjust is all." I sighed. "I guess we won't be having our poker games anymore."

Then I did something I hadn't intended. I started crying and the tears caught in my throat.

"Oh, honey," Jan said. "I wish I was there so I could give you a big hug."

"I'll be okay."

"Two of your best friends."

"Yeah." The tears were starting to dry up now.

"Maybe you should go do something to take your mind off things. Is there a good movie on?"

"I guess I could check."

"Something light, that's what you need."

"Sounds good," I said. "I'll go get the newspaper and see what's on."

"Love you."

"Love you, too, sweetheart," I said.

I spent the rest of the afternoon going through my various savings accounts and investments, trying to figure out what the creep would want to leave us alone. I settled on five thousand dollars. That was the maximum cash I had to play with. And even then I'd have to borrow a little from one of the mutual funds we had earmarked for the kids and college.

Five thousand dollars. To me, it sounded like an enormous amount of money, probably because I knew how hard I'd had to work to get it.

But would it be enough for our friend the vampire?

Neil was there just at dark. He parked in the drive and came in. Meaning he wanted to talk.

We went in the kitchen. I made us a couple of highballs and we sat there and discussed finances.

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"I came up with six thousand," he said.

"I got five."

"That's eleven grand," he said. "It's got to be more cash than this creep has ever seen."

"What if he takes it and comes back for more?"

"We make it absolutely clear," Neil said, "that there is no more. That this is it. Period."

"And if not?"

Neil nodded. "I've thought this through. You know the kind of lowlife we're dealing with? A) He's a burglar, which means, these days, that he's a junkie. B) If he's a junkie, then that means he's very susceptible to AIDS. So between being a burglar and shooting up, this guy is probably going to have a very short lifespan."

"I guess I'd agree."

"Even if he wants to make our life miserable, he probably won't live long enough to do it. So I think we'll be making just the one payment. We'll buy enough time to let nature take its course—his nature."

"What if he wants more than the eleven grand?"

"He won't. His eyes'll pop out when he sees this."

I looked at the kitchen clock. It was going on nine now.

"I guess we could drive over there."

"It may be a long night," Neil said.

"I know."

"But I guess we don't have a hell of a lot of choice, do we?"

As we'd done the last time we'd been here, we split up the duties. I took the backyard, Neil the apartment door. We'd waited until midnight. The rap music had died down by now. Babies cried and mothers screamed; couples fought. TV screens flickered in dark windows.

I went up the fire escape slowly and carefully. We'd talked about bringing guns and then decided against it. We weren't exactly marksmen, and if a cop stopped us for some reason, we could be arrested for carrying unlicensed firearms. All I carried was a flashlight in my back pocket.

As I grabbed the rungs of the ladder, powdery rust dusted my hands. I was chilly with sweat. My bowels felt sick. I was scared. I just wanted it to be over with. I wanted him to say yes, he'd take the money, and then that would be the end of it.

The stucco veranda was filled with discarded toys—a tricycle,

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innumerable games, a space helmet, a whiffle bat and ball. The floor was crunchy with dried animal feces. At least, I hoped the feces belonged to animals and not human children.

The door between veranda and apartment was open. Fingers of moonlight revealed an overstuffed couch and chair and a floor covered with the debris of fast food: McDonald's sacks, Pizza Hut wrappers and cardboards, Arby's wrappers, and what seemed to be five or six dozen empty beer cans. In the hall that led to the front door I saw four red eyes watching me; a pair of curious rats.

I stood still and listened. Nothing. No sign of life. I went inside. Tiptoeing.

I went to the front door and let Neil in. There in the murky light of the hallway, he made a face. The smell *was* pretty bad.

Over the next ten minutes, we searched the apartment. And found nobody.

"We could wait here for him," I said.

"No way."

"The smell?"

"The smell, the rats; God, don't you just feel unclean?"

"Yeah, guess I do."

"There's an empty garage about halfway down the alley. We'd have a good view of the back of this building."

"Sounds pretty good."

"Sounds better than this place, anyway."

This time, we both went out the front door and down the stairway. Now the smells were getting to me as they'd earlier gotten to Neil. Unclean. He was right.

We got in Neil's Buick, drove down the alley that ran along the west side of the apartment house, backed up to the dark garage, and whipped inside.

"There's a sack in back," Neil said. "It's on your side."

"A sack?"

"Brewskis. Quart for you, quart for me."

"That's how my old man used to drink them," I said. I was the only blue-collar member of the poker-game club. "Get off work at the plant and stop by and pick up two quart bottles of Hamms. Never missed."

I wish I could tell you that I knew what it was right away, the missile that hit the windshield and shattered and starred it, and then kept right on tearing through the car until the back window was also shattered and starred.

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But all I knew was that Neil was screaming and I was screaming and my quart bottle of Miller's was spilling all over my crotch as I tried to hunch down behind the dashboard. It was a tight fit because Neil was trying to hunch down behind the steering wheel.

The second time, I knew what was going on: Somebody was shooting at us. Given the trajectory of the bullet, he had to be right in front of us, probably behind the two dumpsters that sat on the other side of the alley.

"Can you keep down and drive this son of a bitch at the same time?"

"I can try," Neil said.

"If we sit here much longer, he's going to figure out we don't have guns. Then he's gonna come for us for sure."

Neil leaned over and turned on the ignition. "I'm going to turn left when we get out of here."

"Fine. Just get moving."

"Hold on."

What he did was kind of slump over the bottom half of the wheel, just enough so he could sneak a peek at where the car was headed.

There were no more shots.

All I could hear was the smooth-running Buick motor.

He eased out of the garage, ducking down all the time.

When he got a chance, he bore left.

He kept the lights off.

Through the bullet hole in the windshield I could see an inch or so of starry sky.

It was a long alley and we must have gone a quarter block before he said, "I'm going to sit up. I think we lost him."

"So do I."

"Look at that frigging windshield."

Not only was the windshield a mess, the car reeked of spilled beer.

"You think I should turn on the headlights?"

"Sure," I said. "We're safe now."

We were still crawling at maybe ten miles per hour when he pulled the headlights on.

That's when we saw him, silver of eye, dark of hair, crouching in the middle of the alley waiting for us. He was a good fifty yards ahead of us but we were still within range.

There was no place we could turn around.

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He fired.

This bullet shattered whatever had been left untouched of the windshield. Neil slammed on the brakes.

Then he fired a second time.

By now, both Neil and I were screaming and cursing again.

A third bullet.

"Run him over!" I yelled, ducking behind the dashboard.

"What?" Neil yelled back.

"Floor it!"

He floored it. He wasn't even sitting up straight. We might have gone careening into one of the garages or dumpsters. But somehow the Buick stayed in the alley. And very soon it was traveling eighty-five miles per hour. I watched the speedometer peg it.

More shots, a lot of them now, side windows shattering, bullets ripping into fender and hood and top.

I didn't see us hit him but I *felt* us hit him, the car traveling that fast, the creep so intent on killing us he hadn't bothered to get out of the way in time.

The front of the car picked him up and hurled him into a garage near the head of the alley.

We both sat up, watched as his entire body was broken against the edge of the garage, and he then fell smashed and unmoving to the grass.

"Kill the lights," I said.

"What?"

"Kill the lights and let's go look at him."

Neil punched off the headlights.

We left the car and ran over to him.

A white rib stuck bloody and brazen from his side. Blood poured from his ears, nose, mouth. One leg had been crushed and also showed white bone. His arms had been broken, too.

I played my flashlight beam over him.

He was dead, all right.

"Looks like we can save our money," I said. "It's all over now."

"I want to get the hell out of here."

"Yeah," I said. "So do I."

We got the hell out of there.

7.

A month later, just as you could smell autumn on the summer winds, Jan and I celebrated our twelfth wedding anniversary. We

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drove up to Lake Geneva, in Wisconsin, and stayed at a very nice hotel and rented a Chris-Craft for a couple of days. This was the first time I'd been able to relax since the thing with the burglar had started.

The funny thing was, I didn't see Neil much anymore. It was as if the sight of each other brought back a lot of bad memories.

Not that I made any new friends. The notion of a midweek poker game had lost all its appeal. There was work and my family and little else.

Then one sunny Indian summer afternoon, Neil called and said, "Maybe we should get together again."

"Maybe."

"It's over, Aaron. It really is."

"I know."

"Will you at least think about it?"

I felt embarrassed. "Oh, hell, Neil. Is that swimming pool of yours open Saturday afternoon?"

"As a matter of fact, it is. And as a matter of fact, Sarah and the girls are going to be gone to a fashion show at the club."

"Perfect. We'll have a couple of beers."

"You know how to swim?"

"No," I said, laughing. "And from what Sarah says, you don't, either."

I got there about three, pulled into the drive, walked to the back where the gate in the wooden fence led to the swimming pool. It was eighty degrees and even from here I could smell the chlorine.

I opened the gate and went inside and saw him right away. The funny thing was, I didn't have much of a reaction at all. I just watched him. He was floating. Face down. He looked pale in his red trunks. This, like the others, would be judged an accidental death. Of that I had no doubt at all.

I used the cellular phone in my car to call 911.

I didn't want Sarah and the girls coming back to see an ambulance and police cars in the drive and them not knowing what was going on. I called the club and had her paged.

I told her what I'd found. I let her cry. I didn't know what to say. I never do.

In the distance, I could hear the ambulance working its way toward the Neil Solomon residence.

I was about to get out of the car when my cellular phone rang.

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I picked up. "Hello?"

"There were three of us that night at your house, Mr. Bellini. You killed two of us. I recovered from when your friend stabbed me, remember? Now I'm ready for action. I really am, Mr. Bellini."

Then the emergency people were there, and neighbors, too, and then wan, trembling Sarah. I just let her cry some more. Gave her whiskey and let her cry.

8.

He knows how to do it, whoever he is.

He lets a long time go between late-night calls. He lets me start to think that maybe he changed his mind and left town. And then he calls.

Oh yes, he knows just how to play this little game.

He never says anything, of course. He doesn't need to. He just listens. And then hangs up.

I've considered going to the police, of course, but it's way too late for that. Way too late.

Or I could ask Jan and the kids to move away to a different city with me. But he knows who I am and he'd find me again.

So all I can do is wait and hope that I get lucky, the way Neil and I got lucky the night we killed the second of them.

Tonight I can't sleep.

It's after midnight.

Jan and I wrapped presents until well after eleven. She asked me again if anything was wrong. We don't make love as much as we used to, she said; and then there are the nightmares. Please tell me if something's wrong, Aaron. Please.

I stand at the window watching the snow come down. Soft and beautiful snow. In the morning, a Saturday, the kids will make a snowman and then go sledding and then have themselves a good old-fashioned snowball fight, which invariably means that one of them will come rushing in at some point and accuse the other of some terrible misdeed.

I see all this from the attic window.

Then I turn back and look around the poker table. Four empty chairs. Three of them belong to dead men.

I look at the empty chairs and think back to summer.

I look at the empty chairs and wait for the phone to ring.

I wait for the phone to ring. ●

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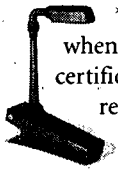

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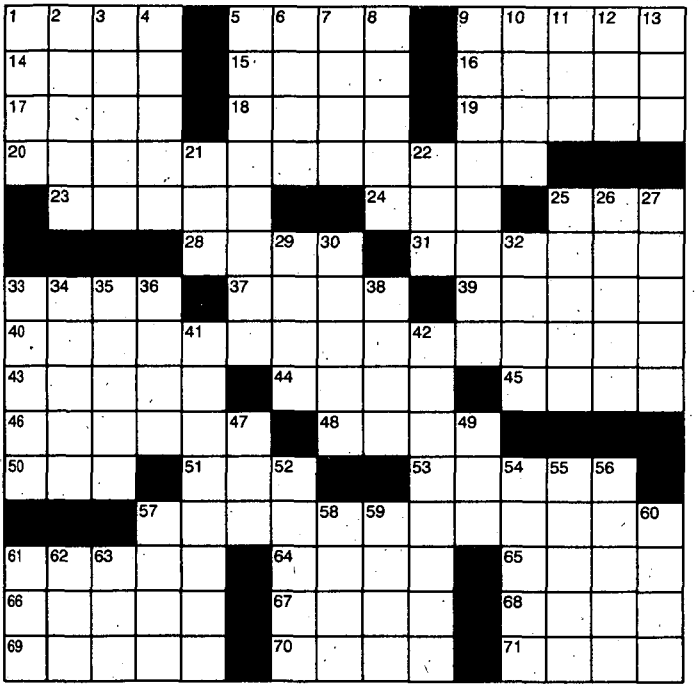
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Clue: He's British

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 157.

ACROSS

1. Rake
5. Soda
9. Devours (with "down")
14. Largest continent
15. *Was It ____ I Saw?* Sue Perry
16. Trailing plants
17. Frees
18. Like some apples
19. Material in Maigret's suit
20. Author of 40 across and 57 across
23. Souvenir

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24. Coll. Freshman subj.
25. Horned viper
28. Daring
31. ____ *of Crime,* John Buxton Hilton
33. False god
37. Tame
39. Vidalia, e.g.
40. No *femme fatale?*
43. North Sea river
44. Ukrainian city
45. Hawaiian goose
46. *Festival of* ____, Jane Haddam
48. Rent
50. Draft admin.
51. Berlin ice
53. Mother-of-pearl
57. Peter's spirit?
61. *Lament for* ____ *Cowboy,* Catherine Dain
64. Short notice of death
65. Ingrid in *Casablanca*
66. *The* ____ *Game,* Jane Langton
67. Novice
68. Encounter
69. Totaled
70. High-schooler
71. Serf

DOWN

1. Author John Dickson ____
2. Willow twig
3. Minute insect
4. Famous film Sherlock
5. Underground cemetery
6. Kind of exam
7. Rendered hog fat
8. *Murder* ____ *Kennedy Center,* Margaret Truman
9. "If you can look into the seeds of time,/ And say which grain ____," *Macbeth I, iii, 58*
10. Like the President's office
11. Year in Claudius' reign
12. Edmund Crispin's sleuth Gervase ____
13. Compass reading
21. Penpoint
22. Part of a bus. add.
25. Stop on ____ (quickly)
26. American artist John
27. Menu item in Rome
29. Unintended hole
30. Credit's opposite
32. Soon
33. Poets
34. Pains' partners
35. AKA
36. New York's ____-Fontanne Theatre
38. Swiss painter Paul
41. How Anne Boleyn was killed
42. Home of Northwestern Univ.
47. Bubba's sibling
49. Scrap
52. Justin ____, author of *Stonedust*
54. Doorbell sound
55. Parts
56. Industrial W. German city
57. Head
58. Theatre award
59. Dublin's country
60. London gallery
61. Oklahoma city
62. Father of 47 down
63. Conclusion

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Art by Laurie Harden

Another Tented Evening

by Melodie Johnson Howe

Maurice Hamlin peered out from the party tent which covered a grassy section of his vast backyard. His shrewd eyes came to an uneasy rest on the Ferris wheel. It spun around in a blur of colorful lights. Well-dressed men and bejeweled women seemed to sit as high as the moon in their swaying chairs. They laughed and waved to one another with that slight embarrassment adults feel when they think they should be enjoying themselves more than they really are.

Disgusted, Hamlin turned his assessing gaze back to the interior of the tent and surveyed the frolicking clowns, the mimes frozen in mocking imitations of his guests, the balloon sellers, the cotton-

©1996 by Melodie Johnson Howe

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candy vendors, and the white-jacketed waiters serving Moët & Chandon champagne.

Hamlin had a familiar look in his eyes; the look of a producer whose movie has gone over budget and out of control. It was an expression I had seen many times in my years of being an actress. But this was not one of Hamlin's movies, this was his wife's fortieth birthday party.

"It's costing me a fortune. Where the hell is she, Diana?" he demanded.

"It's an important birthday. It's not easy for some women." I spoke from experience.

"The party's been going on for almost an hour. Robin's the one who wanted all this."

He tilted his round head toward me. His hair was obviously dyed a reddish-brown color. Hamlin didn't stay up nights worrying about the loss of subtlety in his search for youth, money, and a box-office hit.

"Oh, God, I can't believe I'm married to a forty-year-old woman." He eyed a lithe redhead swaying past him. A blue balloon was tied by a long string to the thin silvery strap of her low-cut dress. Printed on the balloon was HAPPY BIRTHDAY ROBIN.

"Will you go hurry her up, Diana?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Producers never do.

"I hope Robin doesn't sing tonight," he mumbled, walking quickly away to catch up with the young woman. I couldn't remember her name but she had done two movies and was poised to "make it big" or to disappear. It was another tented evening in Hollywood.

I made my way across the sparkling black AstroTurf, grabbed two glasses and a champagne bottle from a waiter's tray, and stepped out of the tent.

Melodie Johnson Howe's first mystery novel, *The Mother Shadow* (Viking/Penguin), was nominated for three major mystery awards: the Edgar, the Anthony, and the Agatha. The book introduced an Archie Goodwin, Nero Wolfe-style detective duo who have tested their crime-solving skills in two subsequent books: *Beauty Dies* (1994), and the upcoming *Cheap Tears*. For *EQMM*, Ms. Howe employs the heroine of a series of short stories begun in the anthology *Sisters in Crime IV*, actress Diana Poole. ✝

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"Diana!"

It was Joyce Oliphant. She had just been named head of Horizon Studios. I knew her, many years ago, when she and I were the last of the starlets.

"Congratulations, Joyce."

"I didn't know you'd be here." She meant: *I thought you were out of the business and no longer important enough to be invited to the Hamlins'.*

Forcing her thin lips into a smile, she purposely did not introduce me to the men standing on each side of her. This was not just a lack of good manners. This was intended to intimidate, to make me feel ill at ease. Their eyes hunted the party for more important people.

"What are you doing with yourself?" She tossed her highlighted brown hair back from her lined, tense face. Her hair was too long for her age. It's difficult for some women to let go of the decade of their youth—ours was the sixties—no matter how successful they are in the present.

"I've got a small role in Hamlin's next picture," I said.

"I heard you had gone back to work. I do miss Colin."

And once again I felt that sharp, isolating pain of loss. Colin was my husband. He had died of a heart attack just fourteen months ago.

"I miss his wit," Joyce continued. "Where has all the wit gone?" Her greedy eyes searched the yard as if she could pluck wit from one of the guests' heads. "Colin had it. There are times, Diana, when a script isn't working, I want to pick up the phone and say get me Colin Hudson, the greatest writer Hollywood ever had."

"I wish you could," I said.

One of the men whispered in her ear. New prey had been found and she and I had talked too long. A conversation at a Hollywood party should not last over thirty seconds.

"We'll talk. God, I hope Robin doesn't sing tonight." Her Chanel shoulder bag, dangling on a gold and leather strap, hit me in the stomach as she spun away.

I was a middle-aged woman, still good-looking enough for a middle-aged woman who was starting over in a business meant for very young women. I had no choice but to work. Colin and I had spent everything he had earned. No regrets. Besides, I had three things in my favor: I could act, I had contacts, and I knew how to play the game.

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The Ferris wheel turned and the music blared as I made my way up the veranda steps to the enormous Neo-Mediterranean house which curved like a lover's arm around a mosaic-lined pool.

"Hello, Diana." Oscar Bryant, my ex-business manager, stood smoking a cigar. Next to him, lurking in the shadow of a banana palm, was Roland Hays, the director.

"How are you, Oscar?"

"Still hoping you'll go out with me."

Dating your ex-business manager would be like dating your ex-gynecologist. He knows too much about your internal affairs.

"You know Roland Hays, don't you?" He turned to Hays. "This is Diana Poole."

The director was a slight man with receding black hair. He had a talent for getting the studios to make his movies even though they never turned a profit. For this reason he was referred to as an artist. His evasive dark eyes almost looked at me.

"Colin Hudson's widow," Oscar explained my existence.

"Great writer," the director muttered. "God, I hope Robin doesn't sing tonight."

"Why?" I asked.

"Have you ever heard her sing?" Oscar asked.

"No."

"Wait. Wait." He stared at the glasses and champagne bottle in my hands. "What's all that?"

"Robin's having trouble making an entrance."

He opened the French door for me. "Maybe you should just leave her up there." He chuckled.

"Better for all of us." The director stepped farther back into the sword-like shadows of the palm.

The house was eerily quiet in contrast to the noise outside. Contemporary art haunted the walls. My high heels clicked out their lonely female sounds as I made my way across a limestone floor to the stairs.

I'd met Robin Hamlin six months ago in acting class. I had gone back to brush up on the craft I had left when I married Colin. I have to admit — and these things are important to admit — I would not be walking up these stairs, and I would not have made friends with Robin in acting class, if she were not Maurice Hamlin's wife. I say these things are important to admit because at least I'm not lying to myself. Not yet, anyway. As I said, I know how to play the game.

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There was a side to Robin that was spontaneous and delightful. There was another side that was petulant, insensitive, and demanding. But she had thought of me for the role in her husband's new movie and got me to read for him and the director. In Hollywood that makes her a person of character. There was also something poignant about Robin. At the age of forty she still dreamed, like a young girl dreams, of being a movie star, a performer, or just famous. Her husband had given her some small roles in his movies. And that's all they were — small roles doled out by a powerful husband to his wife.

I made my way down the long hallway to her bedroom suite.

"Robin? It's Diana," I announced to the closed door. "I come bearing champagne. Robin?" I waited. "Robin? Maurice is worried about you."

I tapped the door with my toe. I pushed it with my foot. It opened. I stepped into a mirrored foyer. My blond hair, black evening suit, one strand of pearls, red lips, reflected in a jagged kaleidoscopic maze.

"Robin? It's Diana."

A mirrored door opened. Robin stood there holding a sterling silver candelabra. Two of the four candles were missing. The ones that remained were tilted at a funny angle. Her black hair caressed her bare shoulders. The famous diamond and emerald necklace that Maurice had given Robin for her last birthday dazzled around her long, slim neck. The necklace and the candelabra were her only attire.

"Nice outfit," I said.

"Thank God, Diana. Come in here quick."

I followed her into the bedroom. She locked the door. Setting the bottle and the glasses on her mauve, taffeta-skirted vanity, I saw William DeLane reflected in the beveled mirror. Fully clothed, he leaned against the white velvet headboard. His misty gray eyes, full of surprise, stared into mine. I whirled around. The right side of his head was caved in. Blood splattered the white coverlet and his green jacket. Little drops of blood dotted the headboard near his thick brown hair. I didn't have to check his pulse to know he was dead. On the floor next to the bed was a white cocktail dress. Blood streaked the shimmery fabric. "I ruined my dress." Robin stamped her foot. Her implanted breasts never moved.

"Jesus Christ, Robin, what happened?"

Her voice went off into a whine. "I'm not going to cry. I'm not

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going to cry." She took a deep breath and didn't cry.

I pried the candelabra from her hand and set it on a table between two lavender-striped chairs.

"It doesn't go there. It goes on the mantel." She gestured toward an ornate marble fireplace.

"Robin, that's William DeLane." DeLane was a young and very successful screenwriter.

"Don't you think I know that? At least give me credit for knowing who I killed. Nobody gives me credit."

"Let me get Maurice."

"No. Don't you dare." She grabbed a silk bathrobe off a chaise longue, slipped it on, and sat down.

"I need to think this out." Her beautiful but remote violet-colored eyes studied me. "DeLane said you two went out last week."

"We had dinner together." With a shaking hand I poured champagne into the two glasses and gave her one. "He wanted to talk with me because I was Colin's wife. Widow. He wanted to know how Colin lived and worked."

"Why?" She crossed her long bare legs. Perfectly manicured toes glistened red.

"I think he was searching for some kind of an example, or a mooring. Some sort of image to hold on to." I took a long swallow of the champagne and avoided DeLane's shocked eyes.

"You mean like a father image?" she asked earnestly.

"More like a male muse. A creative guide in the jungle of Hollywood. He felt his own success was based on sheer guts and ego."

"Isn't everyone's?" Her remote expression became more intent. "Did he talk about me?"

"Yes. He told me he was having an affair with you. His exact words were: 'I'm having an affair with Maurice Hamlin's wife.'"

"But it wasn't enough, was it?"

"He was questioning his relationship to his success. Not his relationship with you," I said carefully, knowing that sex and success were so intermingled in Hollywood that it was difficult to discuss one without the other.

She turned and peered at DeLane. "Why would anybody question success?"

I forced myself to look at him. God, he was so young and such a hack. There was a time when Hollywood turned talented writers into banal, soulless creatures. Now they arrived in town without

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souls. They arrived schooled in the cliched and eager to be rewritten.

"He's had three hit movies," I explained. "And he couldn't tell the difference between the first movie and the third movie. He felt that his words had no meaning. No connection to anything or anybody. Most of all they had no connection to himself. Why did you kill him, Robin?"

She didn't answer. I opened a pair of French doors that led out onto a narrow foot balcony. I could see the spinning Ferris wheel and hear the music and the laughter of the guests inside the tent. I took a deep breath and watched Maurice embracing a tree. I looked again. A blue balloon floated out from under a leafy limb. I realized that between him and the tree was the redheaded actress, whose chances for making it were looking better. I closed the doors.

"DeLane sneaked up here to give me my birthday gift." Robin gestured toward a stack of leather-bound books piled on the floor near the bed. "The complete works of Ernest Hemingway."

"You killed him because he gave you the complete works of Ernest Hemingway?"

"No. But why give me some macho writer's books?"

"I think he was trying to give his own life some meaning."

"But why give me Hemingway's books? Do you see what I mean? Why me?" Her voice quivered. She stood and began to pace, stopped, thought a moment, then went to her closet and pulled out a yellow dress. She grabbed some pantyhose from a drawer.

"Do you remember who I was having an affair with on my last birthday?" she asked, wiggling into the pantyhose.

"I didn't know you then."

"Philip Vance."

Philip was a featured player. Not a star, not a character actor, but always working and always listed around fifth place in the credits.

"Do you know what he gave me for a present?" Robin pulled open another drawer and took out a rhinestone pin from a small velvet box. The broach was in the shape of a heart with a ruby arrow piercing it.

"It's cheap but I love it," she said, sounding like a teenage girl.

I knew the pin well. Philip had given me one fifteen years ago. I never wore it. Philip had been giving out these rhinestone pins for twenty years and always with the same line: "I can't afford dia-

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monds but the heart is real." He counted on the expensive taste of his conquests. Knowing his *ladies,* as he called them, would never wear anything so obviously inexpensive, he was free to give the same pin to his next *lady.*

"It's not that I have to have anything expensive," Robin said. "Just something that's sentimental. Something that means I was loved. 'I can't afford diamonds but the heart is real.'" She stared sadly at the pin, then tucked it lovingly back into the drawer.

"Do you remember when we were in acting class together?" she asked, stepping into the yellow dress.

"Yes."

"And Rusty, our teacher, told us to close our eyes and tell him what we saw? What we imagined? Do you remember what you saw?"

"No."

"A bird with a broken wing on a flagstone patio. A man's wrist and the sleeve of his white shirt turned back. Do you remember what I saw?"

"No."

"Nothing. I saw nothing. And then Rusty asked me to describe the nothingness. Remember?"

"Yes?"

"And I asked how can I describe nothing? I mean, you can't. The closest I could come was a sort of a grayish black. Nothing is nothing. Zip me up."

I zipped her up.

"Oh, God, I didn't want to wear this." She turned on DeLane's corpse as if he had commented on her dress. "He made me feel like nothing. I suddenly could see it. Feel it."

"How did he do that, Robin?"

"He just couldn't believe that when all was said and done, he was a writer who was having an affair with his producer's wife. I could handle that. But he couldn't. So he tried to make it more than it was. And he tried to change me. That's when he made me feel like nothing." She put on some lipstick and smoothed her hair.

"Change you into what?"

"He blamed Maurice for everything. He said it was his money and power that kept me from truly knowing who I was. I told him he was crazy, that he was talking about himself. Not me. I told him it was over. That I didn't want to see him anymore." She

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stared defiantly at herself in the mirror. "I turned forty today and told a man I didn't want him. I didn't need him anymore."

She sat back down on the chaise longue and slipped her feet into bright yellow high heels.

"Then it should've been a great night. Why didn't it just end there?" I poured her another glass of champagne.

"Because as I was leaving to go down to the party he said, 'Please, do us all a favor and don't sing tonight.' "

She tapped her long red nails against the glass, took another sip, and then slowly peered at DeLane.

"Why didn't he want you to sing?" I asked.

"He said people laugh when I sing. I've never heard anybody laugh, Diana. I told him that. He was lying on the bed just like he is now. I was standing by the fireplace. He said it was an uneasy laughter. That if I sang I would remind my guests of how untalented they really are. And how much money they earn for being so untalented. I grabbed the candelabra, turned, and swung it at his head. Not just once, but a couple of times." Her eyes moved from DeLane to me. "You're going to call the police, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"But not till after I sing. Promise?"

"All right."

She stood, downed the last of her champagne, and walked slowly out of the room.

I poured myself another glass, opened the French doors, and stepped out onto the narrow foot balcony. I looked toward the tree. Maurice and the redhead were gone. Robin appeared on the veranda. She stopped and looked up in my direction and waved. I waved back. The emerald and diamond necklace shone like glass. Guests began to move toward her, surrounding her as if she were a movie star and not just another wife who had turned forty. They all disappeared into the tent.

The caterers wheeled a giant cake out onto the veranda. It blazed like a small brush fire. Christ, Maurice had them put all forty candles on the cake. They lifted it off the cart and carried it into the tent. A hush fell. I could hear applause then guests singing Happy Birthday. The Ferris wheel went around in a garish blur, its now empty carriages swaying under the cold eye of the moon. There was another hush. Then the sound of a piano. And soon Robin's voice wafted up through the tent into the night sky. I didn't know the song. Some rock ballad. She hit all the right

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notes, but she had a thin, wavering, unfeeling voice. DeLane was right. She was relentlessly untalented. But not any worse than some others who have made it on just sheer guts and ego. Not any worse than DeLane.

The tent reminded me of an evangelist's tent. A place where people come to be told there is another world. A better world. Where people can believe that Hollywood will save them no matter what they do or how they do it. Her pathetic voice, unintentionally, questioned that belief.

I moved back into the room and again forced myself to look at the body of the young, successful DeLane. I couldn't bear the surprised look in his eyes. After three hit movies his words had finally connected. I pulled the white silk coverlet over his face. ●

"DEAR MR PEABODY,.. WE ARE PLEASED TO INFORM YOU, YOU HAVE BEEN SELECTED FOR JURY DUTY."

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When Winter Comes

by Raymond Steiber

The first time she saw him he was standing on the end of the old wooden floating dock at the town end of the lake. He wore a black leather jacket and black pants and a black pullover sweater so that except for the jacket she might have taken him for some sort of cleric. It was the end of the Adirondack autumn and a few faded leaves floated in the water but not many still clung to the trees.

She poured herbal tea from a thermos and ate her luncheon sandwich and gazed through the windshield of the car. After a while, the man in the black leather coat spotted her there and left the dock and came across the gravel parking lot.

He rapped his knuckles on the window of the off-side door. He had thick black hair that he combed straight back from his forehead. His face reminded her of the young Marlon Brando's, only not so pretty-boy, she thought. Not pretty at all, in fact, but rough and a little hard. Then he smiled and that was pure Brando.

She rolled down the window.

"Sue Corwin?" he asked.

"Yes?"

"I tried your office, but it was all locked up. Then the girl at the Grand Union said that lately you'd been coming over here by the lake to eat your lunch so I tried here. Can I get in the car?"

She capped the thermos and put it on the dash. As he slid inside,

A resident of Cary, North Carolina, Raymond Steiber is a published mystery novelist whose books appeared in the 1980s under the imprint of the legendary editor Joan Kahn at St. Martin's Press. The following work is the first in a series of short stories the author plans featuring a New York sleuth with a budding love interest in an Adirondacks realtor. †

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he looked her over pretty good. The ash-blond hair, the brown eyes. Well, let him, she thought. At thirty-five she still had a lot to show a man.

He smelled of cologne and, faintly, of cigarettes. He said: "My name's Ben Marciano. No relation to the fighter—at least not as far as anybody in my family knows." And then he beamed that Brando smile at her again. He must know all about it and what an effect it had.

He's a little vain, she thought. But that's all right. A man ought to be a little vain.

"I'm looking for a weekend place on one of these lakes up here," he said.

"Buy or rent?"

"Well, buy probably—but I might be willing to lease for a while, too. Of course, if what that girl at the Grand Union told me is true — about all these burglaries, I mean — maybe I ought to look someplace else."

"It's just kids," she said. "They've broken into a few of the summer homes—ones that were already shut up for the winter."

"You sure about that? That it's kids, I mean?"

"They only take little things—things they can hide under a coat or in a pocket. Cameras, radios, stuff like that. They'll get caught eventually."

He trotted out the Brando smile again. "Tell you the truth, I'm not really worried about it. Where I come from, people got to put half a dozen locks on their doors. And the type of kids you run into there are liable to walk off with everything but the plumbing."

"Nothing like that up here," she assured him.

"Just cameras and radios and once in a while a VCR or two."

"Yes, well, I suppose."

"So why don't you show me a couple of places? If you've got the time, I mean, and if you're done with your sandwich. I saw a pretty nice place up the end of the lake here. The dead-end road side."

"An older couple lives there — if you're talking about where I think you are."

"Yeah, but I heard they'd only rented for the fall and that they planned to move on by December."

"The girl at the Grand Union again?"

"Yeah. She was a real chatterbox."

I bet she was, Sue thought, once you turned that smile on her.

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She put the thermos behind the seat, but she left her spill-proof cup in the holder on the dash. They drove back through the town and turned up the narrow road that ran along the opposite side of the lake. The bare limbs of the trees met over the road and there was a weak spill of late-October sunlight through them.

"So what do you do for a living, Mr. Marciano?"

"Ben—call me Ben—because I'll probably call you Sue."

"Ben then—what do you do?"

"I run a little business in the city. I look into this or that for certain types of people. Tell them which way the wind's blowing."

"Investments?"

"Yeah—call it investments."

But the whiff she seemed to catch was organized crime. Or was that only because of the Italian surname? As if the Italians who lived south of the Mohawk River were somehow different from the ones who lived north of it.

"Now let me ask you a question—is it Miss Corwin or Mrs.?"

"It's Mrs."

"I don't see a ring."

"I've only recently stopped wearing one," she said. "A tractor-trailer jackknifed on the throughway last winter in a sleet storm and a lot of cars piled into it—some of them at full speed. My husband was in one of them. No, don't get that look on your face. I wouldn't say I'm over it—I don't think you ever get over a thing like that—but at least I'm past it now. It's . . . behind me."

He spread his hands. "I'm sorry. You see an attractive woman without a ring and, well . . ."

He let it hang, and she said no more. Why had she even said as much as she had? Was it because another lonely winter was coming on and she was somewhat attracted to him and wanted him to know that she was available? She remembered last winter and how bleak it had been—especially the early mornings with no one to roll against and share the rosy warmth of the bed.

They were coming up on the house he wanted to see.

"Just pull in the drive," he said. "I didn't see anybody there this morning and I didn't see anybody yesterday evening either."

"You've been looking the place over."

"I've been looking a lot of places over."

She turned into the gravel drive. The lot sloped sharply down to the lake and the house sat in the only flat spot up near the road. They climbed out of the car.

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He nodded at the empty carport where a lone bicycle sat on its kickstand. "Told you they weren't here. They must be coming back though, otherwise why would they have left the bike?"

"They've got two bicycles actually."

"Pretty active for an older couple, huh?"

"Oh yes. You saw them all over the place when the weather was nicer."

"Funny they only took the one bike. The Siedmans, right? Flora and John."

"How did you know?"

"The girl at the Grand Union."

"Yes, of course."

The house was fairly new, with rustic wooden siding and long vertical windows to catch the sunlight. He hopped up on the porch and peered through the windows. Then he turned again to face her and there was the Brando smile.

He said: "I bet you've got your key case with you. And I also bet it's got a key in it for the front door here."

"No, Ben, I really couldn't—"

"Come on, what's the harm? I only want to see what the inside's like."

"What if they were to return suddenly?"

"We'd just level with them, that's all. Then I'd turn on the old Marciano charm and invite them out to dinner and everything'd be cool again. And believe me, the old Marciano charm never fails."

No, she could see that. It was certainly working on her all right, she thought ruefully.

She opened the briefcase she kept in the trunk of the car and got out the key. A minute later they were standing in the living room of the house.

There was a tea mug on the end table beside the sofa. It still held maybe a quarter of a cup of coffee or tea, but it had been full when it had been left. She could see that from the dried ring along the inner lip.

On the floor there was a scatter of magazines, as if they'd been spilled there by an incautious move and then forgotten. And in the doorway to the kitchen a lone slipper stood sentinel, its toe mashed down as if it had been stepped on rather viciously.

Ben stuck his head in the kitchen for a look-see, then swung back again. She noticed that he avoided the slipper.

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"The bedrooms all upstairs?" he asked.

"Yes, both of them. The bath as well."

He went easily up the staircase. She didn't follow him immediately. There was something wrong about that single slipper in the doorway, something cold and troubling. Yes, and about the scatter of magazines, too.

She went up the stairs and paused at the top. She could hear him moving around in the master bedroom, but when she looked he wasn't there. Then he came through the door that connected with the bathroom and he had a very businesslike look on his face.

He said: "How old would you say Mrs. Siedman is?"

"Mid to late fifties. Her husband might be in his sixties."

"Then I wonder what the hell she wanted these for? Old time's sake?" He held up a pill case.

"What . . . what is it?"

"Birth-control pills."

"You've been going through their medicine cabinet."

"The door was open. They caught my eye. Something else caught my eye, too. A tube of gray hair dye. Not exactly one of your favorite hair colorings. In fact, this one came from a theatrical makeup outfit."

"I don't understand. What are you getting at?" But she knew perfectly well what he was getting at. She tried to remember the last time she'd seen the Siedmans close up.

He put the container of pills down on top of the dresser. "This place got a basement?" he asked.

"Yes, but—"

He moved past her into the hall. She hesitated a moment, then went after him. By the time she caught up with him he was standing at the top of the basement steps reaching for the light switch.

He caught her eye over his shoulder. "We've got to go down there—you know that, don't you? Just to be sure."

"Sure of what?"

He went down the steps without answering her and she followed him. And that was where they made their discovery. They didn't find the Siedmans down there—which was what she'd begun to fear: an elderly couple who somehow needed to take birth-control pills and dye their hair gray. They found cameras and VCRs and radios and cassette players all neatly stacked against the wall. Everything—or so she supposed—that had been stolen from the deserted summer houses along the lake.

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She didn't know whether to be surprised, shocked, or merely amused. The idea of the Siedmans, on their bicycles, stealing all this junk — because that was all it was for the most part, old radios, old cameras, VCRs past their first youth. *Junk.*

She spread her arms. "All of this together—what would a pawnshop pay for it?"

"Not much. A thousand maybe for the whole lot. The guy at the pawnshop would know it was hot and go as low as he could."

"Then why did they even bother to take it? Didn't they know? A thousand wouldn't even cover the rent they're paying."

Ben shrugged. "They had their reasons, I guess. You notice all this crap is stuff you could carry out under your arm? That's probably why they grabbed it — because it was no trouble to walk off with. I wonder why they brought it here though. I wonder why they didn't just dump it in the lake."

"Why would they dump it in the lake?"

He shrugged again. "Maybe because they didn't want it in the first place."

There was an old portable typewriter among the junk. Not even electrical, so that these days it probably wouldn't even bring five bucks at a flea market. He squatted down beside it and removed the cover. Then he dug a used envelope out of his pocket and typed a few words on it and pulled it out again.

He stood up. "Let's get out of here," he said.

"Shouldn't we call the police?"

"You want to explain to them what we were doing down here?"

"You were looking over the house."

"Yeah—try that one on them."

When they were out on the porch again he said: "I saw something up in the bedroom besides birth-control pills. When I first went up there I opened the top drawer of the dresser. There was a Glock forty-caliber pistol in there."

She stared at him, not sure what bothered her most: the pistol or the fact that he'd gone through the dresser.

"A Glock's not your ordinary handgun," he went on. "It's more like an assault rifle pretending to be a pistol. Looks like the Siedmans were expecting some pretty heavy company."

"Ben, who are you?"

"I'm just a guy looking for a getaway house. But I've got eyes in my head. Everybody's got eyes in their head."

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They got into the car and she started the engine.

"When we get to the road," he said, "turn right."

"It's a dead end, Ben."

"Yeah, but isn't there a dirt track that goes off to the left?"

"That's a dead end, too. It finishes at another little lake just over the ridge."

"Drive up there anyway. I want to see something."

She glanced at him. The Brando smile had disappeared the moment she'd gotten the key and his face had been all business ever since. She needed to get to the bottom of this, or maybe just to the bottom of him. So when she backed out onto the road, she turned right just as he'd asked her to.

She stopped where the dirt track came in and he got out and looked at a patch of mud where a puddle had recently dried. After a moment he slid back in the car again.

"There's a bicycle track in the mud there. Like somebody was coming down the track at a good clip and didn't see the road right away and then when he did see it cut the wheel sharp and put a foot out so he could make the turn. That's something you'd probably do in the dark—you know, not see the road in time. I wonder if the bike was the twin of the one that got left under the carport."

"Ben, what are you up to?"

"I'm just curious, that's all. When you get to know me better you'll find I take a big interest in other people's business. You're just getting an early taste of it. And what the hell—aren't you curious, too? Wouldn't you like to know what's up the end of this track?"

"I already know. A lake. Some woods."

"We've run into some funny things today. But those things've got answers and some of them are probably up this track somewhere. But then maybe this car wouldn't make it up there."

"Oh, it'll make it all right," she said crossly.

She had to back up so they could make the turn. Then they went bumping up the track. Ben had sort of a smug look on his face—as if he'd put one over on her. She pressed her lips together and frowned.

He started to get out a cigarette. Then he saw the look she gave him and put it away again.

They crossed the top of the ridge and began coasting down toward the lake. Glimpses of it were visible through the barren trees. But in summer, with a barrier of foliage around it, you

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wouldn't even have suspected that it was there.

The track ended beside the lake, but even before they reached it they saw automobile tire tracks angling away from it. Angling away and then turning back and disappearing into the lake.

She stopped the car. They got out and followed the tracks to the edge of the lake. Now Ben did light a cigarette and stood there smoking it as they stared at the scum of leaves on the surface.

He found a broken tree limb and used it to herd the leaves to one side. It was just about then that the sun broke through and a shaft of light penetrated the green depths.

Ben said: "What kind of car was that the Siedmans drove? It wasn't a dark blue Buick, was it?"

They bumped back down the track.

He said: "They were in there. You know that, don't you?"

She thought about the bicycle track. "Maybe only one of them was in there." She felt cold and it had nothing to do with the late-autumn weather.

"No—they're both in there. I'd lay a bet on it. And I'd also lay a bet that they're in the trunk. The guy that did it probably marched them out of the house with a gun in his hand and made them climb in there and slammed the lid down on them. They would've been pretty crowded, but what the hell did he care? Then he threw the bike in the backseat so he'd have some transportation and drove them up to the lake and just ran them on in. They wouldn't have stood a chance."

"How do you know all this?"

"I'm just speculating, that's all. A guy can speculate, can't he?"

She glanced sideways at him. "Are you some sort of gangster, Ben?"

The Brando smile again. "Do I look like a gangster?"

Yes, she thought, that's exactly what you look like. "I didn't say that right. What I meant was, are you connected in some way?"

"That's movie talk. But no, I'm not connected. Some Italians just work for a living, Sue."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's okay. I can see why you brought it up. Bodies in the trunk of a car—that sounds like gangsters all right. And then there's the fact that I'm so interested."

"Why *are* you interested?"

"Because it's like a puzzle. And we just stumbled on it. And now

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there's all these loose ends lying around. Look, just how deep do you want to get involved in this crap?"

"What do you mean?"

"Those people in the lake, the whole shebang. Because to tell the truth, I don't want to get involved at all."

"You mean not tell the police?"

"I mean tell them anonymously. There's a phone booth right next to where I left my car at the Grand Union. I could call up and say that I'm a hunter and that I spotted something that looked like a car at the bottom of a lake. Then I could give them a phoney name and tell them I'm from Utica or somewhere and hang up."

"I don't know, Ben."

"It'd save us a lot of hassle."

"But isn't it sort of like obstruction of justice?"

"We tell them about the car, then we'll have to tell them about going in the house. And right there things start to get very complicated. Some hotshot might even begin to think that *we* did it."

"But if we start lying—"

"Who's lying? If push comes to shove, you just tell them you thought I was going to use my real name when I phoned."

She let him talk her into it. He was so damned smooth and so damned sure of himself. And she really didn't want to get involved in a murder investigation. That wouldn't just be Frank Bauer, the local sheriff's deputy. That would be outsiders in suits and ties who didn't know her or this town and would trample over everything.

She let him out in the parking lot of the Grand Union. The car parked next to the telephone booth was a silver Probe GT — a working man's idea of a sportscar. As she drove off, she wondered how somebody who owned a car like that could afford a vacation home in the Adirondacks. And then she thought that maybe he couldn't afford such a place, that he'd just been using her for some other purpose.

She worked late that night in her real-estate office, which was really the converted front room of her house. Trying to catch up on various paperwork while her attention kept drifting to Ben Marciano and the sunken car. She'd seen the police cars tooling up the far side of the lake, and then later the wrecker, and her mind had gone numb—unable to hold a consecutive thought for more than a minute at a time—just apprehension, fear that they'd somehow

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discover she'd been involved in the finding of the Buick and make big-time trouble for her.

The apprehension stayed with her, and around 8:30 she gave up on her work and went out and got in the car and drove down to Eddie's place. Eddie's was the local watering hole, a place where you could get a steak or a pizza or a salad and something alcoholic to go with it. The food wasn't all that good, but in a way the food was beside the point. What you really went to Eddie's for was to socialize.

There was a police cruiser parked in the lot outside. When she saw it, it gave her a little start. That'll be Frank Bauer's car, she thought. And maybe, she decided suddenly, that's a good thing.

She made up her mind as she stepped through the front door. There was a pretty good weeknight crowd, but she had no trouble spotting Bauer. They'd gone all the way through grade and high school together—even at one time dated. And how many eons ago had that been? she wondered.

She caught Cathy, the waitress, and asked her to bring her a sandwich and a cup of coffee. Then she went over to Bauer's table. He looked up from his meal.

"Frank, I'm glad I ran into you here. I need to talk to you."

"Well, don't stand on ceremony—pull up a pew. You know I won't bite you."

"You bit me once, Frank, when we were both maybe six or seven years old."

"Seems to me it was the other way around. I guess you heard about the Siedmans."

"I . . . haven't heard all of it."

"I've been up at Hidden Lake all afternoon, helping pull their car out of the water. They were both locked in the trunk, Sue. It was murder."

She thought: Right where Ben said they'd be.

She said: "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Frank." And then she blurted it all out in a low voice. How she and Ben had gone in the house and what they'd found there. And then the drive up to the lake and Ben's proposal about the phone call. Bauer listened to her with a knitted brow and there was no way she could tell what he was thinking. As she finished up, her eyes drifted to the bar — and there he was. Ben Marciano, standing there alone nursing a Genny — and watching her with a serious expression on his face.

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Frank Bauer followed her gaze. "Is that him?"

"Yes. Ben Marciano."

Ben picked up his beer and began threading his way through the intervening tables. When he arrived, he pulled out a chair.

"Mind if I join this conversation? It seems to be about me anyway."

Bauer made a gesture with his hand and Ben sat down.

Bauer said: "That wasn't a very smart stunt you pulled."

"I had to tell him, Ben."

Ben shrugged. "Spilt milk now. Well, what're you going to do, officer? Put the cuffs on me?"

"This is a pretty serious matter, Marciano. We just pulled two bodies out of the Buick."

"Then it was like I figured—they were both in there."

"What do you know about those two?"

"I don't know anything—except that they seemed to shape up in a certain way."

"You must know something. Otherwise why did you con Sue here into letting you into their house?"

Sue shot a look at him. He raised his shoulders and let them fall again. So he had conned her—but when had she not been aware of that?

"I told you," he said, "they fit in a certain way. I asked around town here and everything I heard put the collar on them—unlikely as that seemed at the time."

"Who are you, Marciano?"

For an answer he took a wallet-size leather folder out of his pocket and spun it across the table. Bauer caught it and looked at it and then looked at Ben.

"Are you working up here?"

"Yes. And that's all I'm going to tell you until I've had a chance to talk with my client. But then I'll probably tell you everything and it won't be any later than tomorrow afternoon. Tell you the truth, I'm probably done here anyway—because I think it'll turn out that the Siedmans were the ones I was looking for. It's just that somebody else found them first. Or they found him."

"Who was the killer, Marciano?"

"I don't know and that's the truth."

"What about the Siedmans? What do you know about them?"

"I told you, nothing. They just fit who I was looking for—all except the age. And then that went away, too."

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Bauer seemed to think a moment. "Suppose," he said, "suppose I told you we already know who they were."

Ben narrowed his eyes. "Then you know more than I do," he said.

"Are you sure about that?"

Ben leaned forward. "What did you do? Find some ID on them? A credit card maybe with their real names?"

Bauer got tight-lipped. "Maybe."

"What am I going to have to do? Read about it in the papers?"

"Why should I give you anything? You're not giving me anything."

"I told you. I just need to get in touch with my client. But I can tell you right now, he never even heard of the Siedmans."

"He paid you to find them."

"He paid me to find *somebody*. It just turned out that it was the Siedmans. And even that's not a hundred percent sure."

Bauer resumed thinking again. After a moment he said: "The suits are trying to elbow me out of this investigation. They figure I'm just the local hick deputy — extra baggage that needs to be shoved in the corner. I don't like that, Marciano. I don't like it a damn bit."

Ben shrugged. "I wouldn't either."

Bauer went on. "But maybe you're a way I can get back in again. So I'm going to tell you what I know about the Siedmans — and bright and early tomorrow morning we're going to meet here for breakfast and you're going to tell me what you know. Every last damn thing."

"But not the suits."

"Definitely not the suits."

"I never liked those guys anyway."

"All right, here's the deal, Marciano. Siedman's real name is Reade. We already got a fax back on him because he's wanted for violation of parole. He was supposed to be working as a stagehand with a summer theater group in the Berkshires, but one day last August he just up and disappeared. And his wife disappeared with him."

"What'd they put him in the can for?"

Bauer got a certain look on his face, a know-it-all cop look. "Armed robbery," he said. "And that's another reason that fax came back so fast. Because just about the time he disappeared, there was another one and they want to question him

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about it. Or don't you ever read the papers?"

"I read the papers all right. Berkshires — that's in Massachusetts, right? Not far from where some Indians've set up a casino on tribal land."

"I think you get the picture, Marciano."

Ben looked thoughtful. "Yeah. Yeah. I really think I do."

Sue was getting tired of being left out of things — as if this were the 1950s and the men could just talk around her. She reached out and snatched up the leather folder. What she found inside hardly surprised her. Not after the conversation she'd just heard. It was a plastic-coated card, complete with Ben's photograph, that identified him as a private investigator.

Out in the parking lot she had a few words for him.

"You used me, Ben."

"Yeah, and I'm sorry as hell about that. But to tell you the truth, I'd do it again. It's how I operate, it's what I have to do. Look, let's go someplace where we can talk." He glanced back at Eddie's place. "Someplace without Frank Bauer. I owe you an explanation."

They ended up in the kitchen of her house where she put on a pot of tea. Ben watched her through half-closed eyes as she busied herself. The kitchen was brightly lit and had old-fashioned white metal cabinets.

"That Bauer guy — is he sort of interested in you?"

"He might be. He's divorced and I'm a widow."

"Known him long?"

"I've known him forever, Ben."

"I guess that explains why you spilled the beans to him."

"What we did this afternoon was stupid. We should've gone straight to the police."

"Well, stupid from your point of view. But I needed a little time and I needed it free of the cops."

She filled a couple of cups and put them down on the table. Then she sat down opposite him.

"You were going to do some explaining, Ben."

He rubbed his jaw. "Yeah, so I was. Look, there's this woman lives downstate on practically no money — late fifties, something like that — name of Elizabeth Schulman. She's got a grown son out in the Midwest somewhere, but they had a big blowup once over her drinking and they haven't spoken in years. She's got a

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semidetached house that she paid off with her husband's insurance money, and about a month or so ago her neighbor finds her in there — all tied up to a chair in the kitchen with a gag in her mouth and stone dead. People who tied her up probably didn't mean to kill her, but she had emphysema and her lungs couldn't cope with the gag. Anyway, the son flies in from the Middle West. He's all broken up because of the way he neglected his mother — you know, big guilt trip. He made a little loot out there — same gig as you, by the way, real estate — and he never once thought to help her out and now here he is burying her. And to make matters worse, the police are getting nowhere at finding her killers. So he decides to hire me to find them."

Sue leaned forward. "You said killers. That means two."

"Two or more anyway. But you're right — in this case it means two. A man and a woman were spotted in the neighborhood two nights running — a couple of strangers sitting in either a black or a dark blue car. My guess is that they were watching the semidetached. Maybe they were waiting for somebody to show up there. And when that somebody didn't, they decided to go in and get some answers any way they could."

"And you think that was the Siedmans."

He raised his shoulders. "I'm only guessing, but sure. Let me tell you some more. This Mrs. Schulman had a kid brother maybe fifteen years younger than her. They came from a problem family, and when they were kids they bounced through half a dozen foster homes together. They were close, real close, the way that a brother and sister can get in that situation. Later the brother always saw that she had some cash to live on. Sent it through the mail when he couldn't deliver it personally. His given name was Everett, but he didn't like that so everybody called him Jack. Jack Preston."

"Nobody I know," Sue said.

"I think he's here. I think he's hiding out in this area. And I think the Siedmans came here looking for him. The only thing I didn't know was why they wanted him so badly. But then your friend Bauer opened his mouth tonight and now I know that part, too."

"It has to do with an armed robbery, doesn't it?"

"Yeah — last August in the Berkshires. A couple of holdup artists knocked over a casino strongroom on an Indian reservation. One of them dressed up like a Brinks guard and then when

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the real Brinks guard came around to pick up the weekend take, he just followed him inside like he was part of the act. By the time anybody figured out what was happening he had the drop on them with a pump-action shotgun. Then a fat little guy with black hair and dark glasses joined the action with a handgun and they cleaned the place out. Or at any rate that's what I remember from the newspapers. They got away with three or four hundred thousand, and supposedly the getaway car was driven by a woman."

"The Siedmans and Jack Preston—is that what you're saying?"

Ben half-closed his eyes. "It seems to fit anyway. Look at it this way: Jack Preston pulls a doublecross and runs off with the money. Maybe they were all supposed to rendezvous someplace and he never showed up. But somewhere along the line he's made a mistake and the Siedmans get a line on his sister. They break into her house and tie her up and then they find one of those envelopes he sends her with money in it. And this one's got a note inside, so they know it's from him. And even better, it's got a postmark on the outside of it and it's right here—this little town in the Adirondacks. So they tool on up here. But they don't know exactly where Preston's hiding, so they rig up a little disguise so he won't recognize them if he sees them before they see him. No problem there—hasn't this guy been working for a theatrical company all summer? So out comes the makeup and suddenly they're both twenty years older—if you don't look too close, that is. And what with sunglasses and hats and baggy clothes, I'd guess nobody *did* look too close."

"How did *you* know where to come, Ben?"

"Same way they did—postmark on an envelope. Only this one came a couple of weeks later—just dropped in my lap so to speak. Oh, it was a shot in the dark all right, but what else did I have? Then I came up here and began hearing about all these robberies."

"That's something else I don't understand. Why were the Siedmans breaking into all these houses and taking things?"

"They didn't know where Preston was, but they guessed that he might be hiding out in one of these houses that'd been shut up for the winter. So one by one they were breaking into them and looking for signs of his presence. And every one they broke into, they took something away with them. That was because they wanted people to think it was just robberies and not them looking for Preston. And in particular they wanted *Preston* to think that in case he got wind of it. And here's the bitch of it, Sue. They actu-

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ally found the place he was hiding, but they never knew it until he showed up on their doorstep with a pistol in his hand. And then it was too late."

"How do you know they found it?"

He took an envelope out of his pocket. "This is the envelope that brought me here. Take a look at the address on it and tell me what you see."

She studied it over her teacup. "I see Mrs. Schulman's name typed twice."

"I typed it the second time. I typed it in the basement of the Siedman house on that old typewriter we found there — you watched me do it. And both those lines are exactly the same. They even got the same little skip after the 'a.' "

She saw what he was getting at. "They broke into the house where Preston was hiding, but they didn't realize it. And then to cover their tracks they walked off with the typewriter just as they'd walked off with all the other things."

"Sure. Preston was probably tucked away in a closet or a pantry somewhere. He hears their voices and recognizes them. Now he's really in the soup, and the only way out of it is to follow them back to their house and off them. Thing is, he forgets the typewriter. Or maybe he never even realized that it'd been taken."

She gazed at him over her teacup. "What are you going to do now, Ben?"

"Tell Bauer everything I know. Well, almost everything. I think I'll leave the part about the typewriter out of it."

She shook her head. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I'm done with the Schulman end of this business—the people who tied her up are dead. But don't you think the casino's insurance company would like to have that money back? And don't you think they'd pay a finder's fee to the guy who did it?"

"But you don't know any more than the Siedmans knew."

"Uh-uh. I know one thing more. I know — what is it? — nine houses've been broken into, but only eight of them have been reported to the police. So all I got to do is find the unreported one. And knowing what I know now, that ought to be just legwork."

"It's got to be more than that, Ben."

"Figure it out. Preston's on the run. He can't risk showing his face to a glazier or a locksmith. So the damage is still there—the damage the Siedmans did breaking into his hideout. And it'll be perfectly visible from the outside."

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She didn't see Ben all the next day. He was staying in a cabin court down in town and she drove past it once or twice, but his car was never there. She didn't see Frank Bauer either. Maybe he was busy with the suits, dazzling them with what he'd found out from Ben. She wondered if Frank was interested in her. He seemed to act as if he was at times, but he never pressed it — maybe because he sensed that Ted's death was still too recent for her. Then she wondered how she felt about Frank, and came to no conclusion.

The next afternoon she ate lunch beside the lake again. And that was where Ben Marciano found her.

He slid onto the seat beside her with his Brando smile working. She'd learned not to trust that smile, but that didn't mean she was immune to it.

"I think I found the house," he said, "but I need to get a little closer to make sure. And for that I need your help."

"Do I get part of the finder's fee?"

He eyed her. "If this works out, half and half."

"You're very generous," she said sceptically.

"The money's not real yet so I can afford to be."

He gave her a rundown on what he'd been doing the past day and a half. Mainly it consisted of parking discreetly anywhere he saw a driveway, then circling up through the woods and examining rear doors and windows with a pair of binoculars.

"I found a place about three miles out of town. Not on a lake or anything, but off by itself on a little unpaved road. Cedar siding, a big deck at the back, an attached garage. The ground floor's one continuous room, sort of like a studio apartment, and there's a kind of bedroom upstairs — really just a sleeping loft. You know the place?"

She thought a moment. "I might know it."

"There's a piece of plywood nailed across the lower half of the window in the back door. It looks pretty fresh — like the pane just got broken out recently. I didn't see anybody around, so I took a quick look in the side window of the garage. There's a four-wheel-drive Jeep in there. Lot of old mud on it — dried mud — like it hasn't been moved in a while."

"Waymer," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"It's owned by a man named Paul Waymer. Nobody's ever seen

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him. He bought it through an agency in Saranac Lake about a year ago. Took over somebody else's loan."

"So if I'm right, and it's him, he's been planning this business for a long time. The doublecross, I mean, the hiding out. Maybe he's even done it before someplace else."

"You've already looked this house over pretty well on your own —right?"

"Right."

"Then why do you need me when you look it over again?"

"Because I want to look closer and that takes time and I need a cover story in case somebody shows up. I don't want to alarm Preston or Waymer or whatever he calls himself. I don't want him running before I can pin him and the money down."

"So what's our famous cover story?"

"You're showing me some land out that way and I spot this house and get all hot about it. Now what's more natural than a real-estate agent making a few inquiries and trying to drum up a sale?"

She leaned an arm on the steering wheel. "Nothing," she said. "So let's go."

Ten minutes later they pulled up in front of the cedar-frame house. It was a pretty gloomy day, the kind when you needed to switch on the inside lights, but no light showed at the windows.

They climbed out of the car.

"No name on the mailbox yet," Sue said.

"No mail either. I checked."

"Lucky him. My mailbox is filled with everything I don't want."

They headed toward the house.

"We'll hit the doorbell," Ben said. "Probably nobody'll answer. That'll give us an excuse to walk around the outside of the place looking in windows. Maybe see how firm that piece of plywood is."

"I don't think I like that idea, Ben."

"Wait till we come to it. You can always go sit in the car."

They went up on the porch and Ben hit the button. They heard the bell ring inside the house. No answer, so Ben hit it again.

"Looks like we try the plywood," he said.

"Don't be stupid, Ben. Let's call Frank and let him handle it."

"Then he gets the finder's fee."

But just then a man came around the side of the house and the argument became academic. He wore an old oil-stained sweater

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and a pair of Levi's and there was a trowel in his hand with a little fresh glop on the blade. The hair was blond and cut short, almost a military cut in fact, and underneath the sweater he had a muscular build, particularly in the chest and the arms.

"Well, he isn't fat," Sue whispered, "and his hair's not black either."

"No," Ben said, "but that's Jack Preston all right. I've seen his picture."

The man came up to the edge of the porch. "You looking for somebody?" Not friendly, not unfriendly either.

"You own this place?" Ben asked.

"Yes. My name's Paul Waymer." As if he wanted them to know that right away. Waymer, not Preston.

"I'm looking for some property up here, and this place sort of caught my eye."

"It's not for sale," Waymer said shortly.

"In my experience, everything's for sale if you can find the right price."

"Well, this place isn't. Look, I'm pretty busy right now. I'm putting in a new window out back."

"Sure, but can't you let us take a peek inside? I really like this house, what I can see of it anyway, and maybe I could build something a lot like it."

Sue said: "It's the quickest way to get rid of him, Mr. Waymer. I've been showing him houses all week and when he gets an idea in his head he just bulls ahead with it."

Sue smiled at him. Ben smiled at him. But all Waymer seemed to be able to do was frown and stare at them. And in particular he stared at Ben. All at once he seemed to make up his mind about something.

"All right, I'll show you inside. But let's make it quick."

He got rid of the trowel. Then he jumped up on the porch and fished the door key out of his pocket.

Sue said: "We really appreciate this, Mr. Waymer."

He muttered something at her under his breath and opened the door. They went inside. It was a pretty nice place. Hardwood floors. A high wood-beamed ceiling. A modern woodstove on a square of shiny black tiles. Not much furniture — in fact, hardly any at all—just a few chairs and a table with a butcher-block top.

Waymer shut the door.

"All right," he said, "now who are you two?"

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And suddenly there was a pistol in his hand.

Ben spread his hands. "Hey, man, take it easy."

"You take it easy. And tell me quick who you are."

"Ben Marciano—and this is Mrs. Corwin."

"That's just names. I want to know *who*. There's been a lot of break-ins in this area. They even tried it here. Maybe you two are mixed up in that. And you—I saw you looking around here earlier today and then driving off in a silver Probe."

"I was interested in the place, and Mrs. Corwin here's a real-estate agent."

"Let me give you my card," Sue said.

"Keep your hands out of your bag. In fact, toss it over here."

There was a tremor in her hand as she slipped the strap from her shoulder. Waymer didn't even try to catch the bag. He just let it fall to the floor.

"Now you—take off your jacket and take it off slow. Then kick it across to me."

Ben did as he was told, never taking his eyes off Waymer's face.

Waymer did a knee bend and scooped up the leather jacket. Then he began going through the pockets with his free hand. It didn't take him long to find the wallet-size leather folder. He looked it over, then pocketed it, then hard-eyed Ben.

"Did the Siedmans put you onto me?"

Ben just stared at him.

Waymer waved the pistol at him. "Answer me!"

"In a way they did."

"Are you carrying? Get your pistol out and slide it across the floor to me."

"I don't wear one."

"Roll up your shirt. Pull your pockets inside out. Then turn around so I can make sure you don't have a belt holster in the small of your back."

Ben did all of it.

"Looks like you've been doing a little bodybuilding," he said over his shoulder.

"Shut up," Waymer said. He was shaken and angry and at any moment he might let fly with the pistol.

"All right," he said, "we're going down in the basement. The woman first, then you, and I swear to you I'll blow your spines apart if you make me the least bit nervous. The door's off the kitchen. Now move."

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"You shouldn't have panicked back there, Waymer."

"Shut up."

"If you hadn't pulled the gun you could've bluffed your way right on through."

Waymer gave him a shove. "I said shut up!"

They descended the stairs and came to a halt in the middle of the basement. There was a weightlifting machine down there and a bench for sit-ups. This was where Waymer had lost all the fat he'd been carrying last summer.

He waved the pistol at the opposite wall. "You — Marciano. Open that metal access door."

He crouched down beside the door. Now that he was close to the wall he could see that it was a phoney, just cinder block covered with plaster, and that the basement extended some feet beyond it. He unfastened the access hatch and it fell away from the wall. Beyond it there were a couple of water pipes and a valve.

"Turn the valve all the way to the stop."

He did it.

"Now grab hold of the pipes and pull straight out."

The whole thing was a single metal box and when you pulled it out there was just an empty square allowing you access to the far side of the basement. But anybody just opening the access door would only see plumbing.

Waymer swung the barrel of the pistol around at Sue.

"You — crawl on through to the other side. Then you follow her, Marciano."

She was shaking as she got down on her hands and knees and hated herself for it. She worked her way through the hole in the wall, scraping an elbow in the process. When she reached the other side, she found herself in a long narrow room that ran the length of the basement's right side. At the far end of the room there was a bathroom with a sink and a commode. At her end stood a bunk bed, an old army footlocker, and a little under-the-counter refrigerator with a hot plate sitting on top of it.

Ben squirmed through after her. As she backed up to make room for him, she saw other things. A reading lamp over the bunk, a pile of paperback books on the floor, a box of canned goods beside the sink in the bathroom. That was it, but then, that was all there was room for.

Ben got to his feet. Behind him Waymer shoved the metal box back in place. All at once the room was in total darkness. Well,

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almost total darkness. There was a grille-covered vent in the ceiling through which a little gray light seeped. Sue fumbled her way into the bathroom and swung her hand around until it came in contact with the chain for the overhead light — and at the same moment Ben switched on the reading light over the bunk.

He looked around him. "Pretty nice little hideout Waymer made for himself."

"Ben, what are we going to do?"

He didn't seem to hear her. "The bathroom was probably here from the start. Then he got the idea of extending the wall and creating this room. He's probably been hiding out in here during the day. Then when night came he'd go upstairs and fix himself a meal in the dark and then work out on that weight machine. Far as anybody could tell, the place was empty. Even if they forced their way inside, it'd look empty. But now — maybe just today, in fact — he's ready to face the world again."

"Ben. Please."

He seemed to pay attention to her again. He crouched down beside the metal box and listened.

"I don't think he's out there anymore," he said.

Their side of the box had a couple of latches on it so that it could be locked in place from within the hidden room. The latches were disengaged now. Ben put his back against the wall and shoved the metal box with his feet. It didn't move. It didn't even creak.

"He's locked it from the outside — but then what kind of fool would he've been if he hadn't."

"Can't we break through somehow?"

"The wall's a better bet. It's just cinder block. We can break up the bunk and use pieces of that to work on it. It'll take time though and I don't know how much of that we've got."

He got to his feet and looked around again.

"I told you I saw a picture of him. I saw it in Mrs. Schulman's house. He was blond in it, so the black hair was just a dye job. He holes up here until his hair grows out enough so that he can give it a military cut and be blond again. He works out on the weight machine and slowly turns all that fat into muscle. By the time winter comes, he's a whole new person — Paul Waymer — and can walk free with the money."

"Quit playing detective, Ben, and figure a way out of this mess!"

He grinned at her. "Don't panic yet. I'll tell you when to panic. Let's see if there's anything useful in this footlocker."

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There was a padlock on it, but he found a hammer and a screwdriver in the cabinet under the sink and made short work of the hasp. He peeled back the lid — and there inside was the money from the casino robbery. Stacks and stacks of it all neatly rubber-banded together.

Sue leaned over his shoulder and gave a little gasp at what she saw.

"He screwed up, Sue. He locked us in here with the money—the sweat he was in, he probably didn't even think about it. Now we've got an edge on the bastard."

All at once Sue heard something rattle over her head. She was standing right underneath the grille for the ceiling vent. She looked up and saw that a screwdriver blade had been jammed into it from above.

Ben glanced up sharply. "What is it?"

"He just wedged the ceiling vent open with a screwdriver."

Ben looked worried. "We must be right under the garage here."

Then something else got jammed in the vent. A length of rubber hose.

Ben pushed her aside and stood directly under the vent, looking up.

"Waymer! Do you hear me?"

Overhead the engine of the Jeep rumbled to life. Exhaust fumes began pouring down the hose into the room below.

"Waymer—*dammit*—listen to me!"

Already a blue cloud filled the space near the ceiling. The thick odor clawed at their lungs.

"Waymer—listen! I'm still degenerate enough to smoke a pack of cigarettes a day! I carry a cigarette lighter in my pocket! Are you listening? *If you don't shut that engine off*—RIGHT NOW—*I'm setting fire to the money!*"

The Jeep engine continued to rumble.

"Waymer—did you hear me?"

All at once the engine stopped dead.

Ben wiped a hand across his face.

Sue had a grip on his shoulder. "Is it time to panic yet?" she asked edgily.

"Pretty close. Do it quietly though."

He continued to stand there staring up at the vent. The acrid odor of exhaust fumes clung to the air. All at once there was a scraping noise behind them. They both swung around. The metal

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box was being pulled back. Now a fresh stream of air came dribbling in.

Ben motioned Sue back into the bathroom. Then he crouched against the wall beside the opening. Apparently Waymer was doing the same thing on the other side.

For a moment they just listened to each other's breathing. Then Waymer spoke.

"Shove out the money," he said.

"No way."

"I said shove it out!"

"You put us in here with it and now we're sitting on it."

He seemed to think a moment.

"All right—both of you come out of there. We'll make a deal."

"Uh-uh. That'd separate us from the money and the only deal you'd make then is to gun us down in cold blood."

Waymer seemed to think some more. Ben could almost smell the sweat pouring off him. All he'd gone through to get the loot—murder, armed robbery, the works — and now one wrong move, one mistake, and he could lose the ranch.

"I could seal you in there," he said after a moment. "I could starve you out."

"You're forgetting all the food you left behind. It'd be a long time before it ran out. And when it did we'd just start burning the money ten grand at a clip until you shoved in some fresh."

Waymer went back to thinking again. Ben turned his head and gave her a big grin. "He's going nuts out there," he whispered.

And we're going nuts in here, she thought.

Waymer finally spoke again.

"All right, all right. New deal. You shove *half* the money out of there. Then I'll lock you in again and take off in the Jeep. It shouldn't take you more than a day or so to break out of there. And when you do you'll have a hundred and seventy thousand dollars to split between you. And if you want to keep it you'll have to keep quiet about me."

"I don't like that idea either, Waymer. Because once you've got half the money in your hands here's what you'll think. You'll think, well, that part's safe — so now I can start gassing them again and hope the fumes get them before they can burn the rest of it."

"I could stick a garden hose down that vent! I could flood the place! Then you'd never burn the money!"

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"Sure. Go ahead. Then come back down here and listen at this hole while we start flushing the money down the commode."

Waymer went berserk then. He screamed obscenities. He flung the access door across the basement where it crashed into the weight machine. He did everything but punch out windows with his fists and take an axe to the woodwork.

Ben waited him out with a tight little smile on his face.

At last he blew himself out. He came back to the hole in the wall and crouched there, breathing hard and heavy. When he finally got enough control of himself to speak, his voice was husky and tight.

"All right, Marciano—what's *your* idea?"

"Simple. You come in here and we do a deal."

Heavy breathing on the other side of the wall.

"I don't like that idea," Waymer said.

"Then you're screwed. Unless you just want to cut your losses and burn the house down around our ears. And that might not work either."

A long silence. Then Waymer seemed to come to a decision.

"We'd have to do it my way," he said.

"What's your way?"

"You both walk by this opening so I can see nobody's waiting to jump me. Then you stand by the wall at the head of the bunk."

"Why there?"

"If you go there you can't shut yourselves up in the bathroom."

Ben glanced back at her. He seemed to be trying to send her a message with his eyes—something Waymer had just given away.

"We can live with that," he said slowly.

"And the hammer. The hammer and the screwdriver. They're under the bathroom sink. I want you to toss them out here before I go in."

"Making sure we don't use them to attack you, Waymer?"

"What do you think?"

"They're right here on the floor beside me. I used them to open the footlocker. I'm going to toss them out right now."

He reached back for them, then slung them through the opening. Sue heard them clatter across the basement floor.

Waymer said: "Now do the rest of it. Walk past the opening one by one and stand by the head of the bunk."

"Sure."

Ben rose to his feet. He eased into the bathroom and reached

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into the cardboard box beside the sink. His hand came out with a large-size can of pork and beans in it.

He nodded to her. She walked stiffly by the opening in the wall. Ben followed her. As soon as they were standing beside the bunk he leaned down and whispered in her ear.

"Crouch down in the corner."

"W-what?"

"Do what I tell you."

Waymer came through the opening in a rush with the pistol in his hand. Ben wound up with the can of beans and let fly. Waymer managed to fire anyway. But he only managed once.

It was snowing when she pulled into the parking lot beside the lake — a wild swirl of flakes that looked bad but would probably soon subside. I won't be able to eat my lunch here much longer, she thought. Winter's come.

She'd started the practice in the spring. Before they had married, she and Ted used to meet here. They'd eat and then stroll along the shore, maybe steal a not-so-innocent kiss in the shadow of a tree. Coming here was a way of remembering him. And now, soon, she'd have to let that memory go until spring came again. And then it would be different—more distant.

She didn't see the silver Probe until she'd parked beside the lake. It was sitting under the bare branches of a sumac, and already the windshield was an impenetrable white. As soon as he saw her, he got out of the car and a cascade of snow dropped from the door window. He headed for the place where she'd parked. He was still limping from where Waymer's bullet had penetrated his calf.

I don't want to talk to him, she thought. Or maybe it's just that I don't want to talk to him just yet—not before I've put Ted away. Not before I've closed that particular cupboard of memory for another year.

He tapped on the window, then opened the door and slid inside. There was snow in his hair and now it began to melt down the side of his face.

He got out a handkerchief. "I finally got the money from the insurance company," he said as he mopped the snow away.

"Did you?"

He slid a white envelope out of his pocket. "That's your share. I thought I'd bring it up personally rather than trust the mail."

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"How much?"

"It's sixteen, five. Thirty-three for the both of us."

"We could've had three or four hundred thousand."

"We were too honest. Or too stupid. Let's just say we were too honest."

She took the envelope. "Frank Bauer said I'd never see this money—that I'd have to fight you for it."

For the first time since she'd known him she saw a flash of anger behind his eyes. "Frank Bauer can—" Then he got hold of himself. "He can do what he wants," he finished lamely. "Look, I sort of thought we might drive on up to Saranac or Placid this evening and have a nice little dinner to celebrate."

"I don't know, Ben."

"Dammit, Sue, you can't play widow woman all your life."

"Can't I?"

"No — and you'd better listen to me because Ben Marciano is always right. Wasn't I right about Waymer?" And then he pulled that Brando smile on her again.

And what could she do but smile back at him. ●

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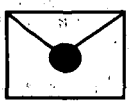

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Nobody Likes Aunt Agnes

by Mignon F. Ballard

Yep. There it was. Broken off clean to the ground. *Just like an elephant had stomped on it!* Aunt Agnes said.

Now she grabbed my arm in her purple-clawed vise. "See, didn't I tell you, Virginia? My favorite peony — my beautiful pink Hawaiian Coral — and somebody's deliberately smashed it! Now who would dislike me so much as that?"

Who wouldn't? I wanted to say. It could've been her neighbor across the street, whose cat disappeared mysteriously after leaving paw prints on my aunt's car. Or maybe Cousin Florence, who lost the race for city council because of a nasty rumor Aunt Agnes concocted. My aunt never forgave her for marrying that good-looking young doctor she'd picked for herself. Why, even Uncle Everett might've broken the plant as a taste of retribution for twenty years of married hell. He couldn't afford a divorce.

Or—if only I'd thought of it—it could've been me.

When my Grandmother McKenzie died, Aunt Agnes went through her mother's house and took everything she thought worth having — even the old cherry sleigh bed that was supposed to come to Dad. And he didn't say a word — never would stand up

Mignon F. Ballard is the author of six adult mystery/suspense novels and one award-winning children's novel. Born and raised in Calhoun, Georgia, the author currently makes her home in Fort Mill, South Carolina. Readers interested in Ms. Ballard's latest book-length fiction should look for *Minerva Cries Murder* (Carroll & Graf, 1993).

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to his sister. Scared of her, I guess. "Don't mess with a pit viper with a headache," he says.

When my aunt inhaled it was as though she had sucked up the sun, and her dark shadow cast a pall over the frail lobelia cowering by the walk.

"I know who's responsible for this," she announced, dangling the broken plant's droopy remains in my face.

"Who?" I backed onto the patio and sat on a bench next to the hideous cement gargoyle that threatens the black-eyed Susans.

"Camilla, who else? It's the only way she'll ever win." My aunt exhaled, and dark clouds bloomed over brave-faced blossoms. "Well, we'll see about that!" she said.

Camilla Ferguson next-door competes each year with Aunt Agnes for Best of Show in the Corkscrew Creek Summer Garden Festival, but so far neither of them has won. The poor woman is barely five feet tall, weighs about as much as a sack of potatoes, and walks with a slight limp. Besides, she'd been under a doctor's care for a severe allergic reaction. I reminded my aunt of this.

"Apparently she wasn't so sick when she enticed Barrows," Aunt Agnes said with an imperceptible arching of one dark brow.

Marvin Barrows, my aunt's gardener, reminded me of a swashbuckling hero from an old movie—one who's just a few years past his prime: Errol Flynn with thinning hair and a great tan. He often smiled to himself while trimming hedges.

During the three years he worked for Aunt Agnes she came very close to smiling herself on several occasions. She also lost five or six ugly pounds, and gave her rattiest clothes to the Desperate and Destitute Fund. Unfortunately, only a few weeks after he went to work for my aunt's rival, Marvin Barrows disappeared.

"I miss seeing Mr. Barrows," I said, breaking off a shattered geranium. "Wonder where he could be?"

My aunt made a curious sound—like some kind of swamp creature stuck in the mud. The place she named sounded like that region I've often thought she, herself, might spend eternity in if there's such a thing as justice.

Now a peculiar, almost pleased expression crossed her face. "They say she looks perfectly dreadful," she said.

"Who?" I asked.

"Camilla, of course! Face all red and weepy, huge welts up to her elbows. She won't look so pretty now! Won't get much gardening done either."

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"I don't understand how all that poison ivy came to be mixed with her creeping verbena," I said. "She swears it wasn't there the day before."

Aunt Agnes wasn't talking, but I couldn't help but notice she'd thrown away a perfectly good pair of gardening gloves a few days before.

My aunt hurled the broken branches at the accused neighbor's yard. "This time she's gone too far," she said. I almost expected her to paw the ground and snort. But I didn't have time to reply because at that very moment, the biggest, ugliest mongrel I ever saw leaped over the waist-high wall between the two yards and went straight for my aunt's pampered hydrangea. His long teeth could make a sieve out of the metal watering can I held in front of me, and his feet were as big as the moon.

The breathless housekeeper from next-door chased after him. "Here, Atlas! Stop that now! Bad dog—you come back here!"

But Atlas only shrugged—or seemed to—and had another helping of tender blue flowers.

"I'm so sorry about this," the woman said, tugging on the huge dog's chain. "Miss Ferguson got him to guard the house while they were away, and I can't seem to keep this naughty animal confined."

"And how is Miss Ferguson?" I asked. I hadn't been aware she was planning a trip.

"Oh, better — much better." The housekeeper smiled. "In fact, the ceremony went off just as planned. He went ahead to make arrangements, you see. They were married yesterday in San Francisco. Plan to tour the wine country before they leave for Europe. I hear England's so pretty this time of year — so many gardens and all."

A few days later the local paper featured a photograph of the smiling newlyweds, Marvin and Camilla Barrows, with their arms around each other. Her rash seemed to have cleared up completely.

Since then Aunt Agnes has taken to weaving place mats out of soda straws. And I could have sworn I saw Uncle Everett hiding bones in the dahlias. ●

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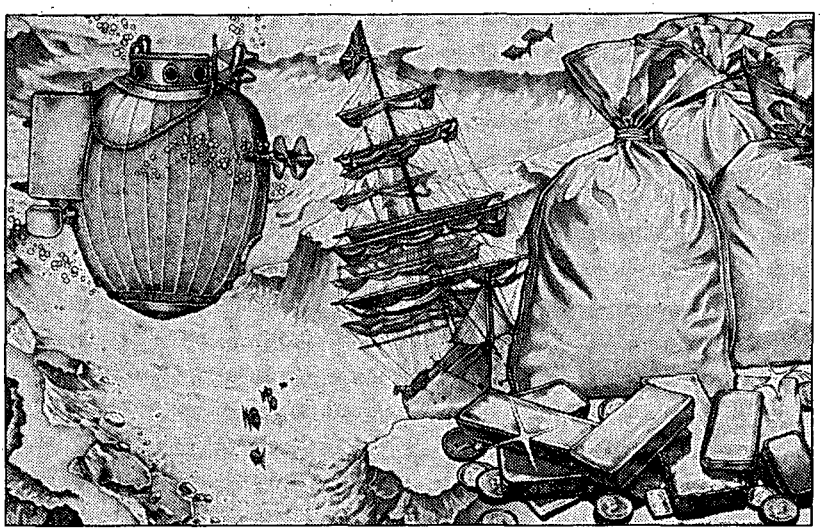

Art by Ron Chironna

KING GEORGE'S GOLD

by Edward D. Hoch

It was shortly after the indecisive Battle of Monmouth, toward the end of June, in 1778, that Alexander Swift found himself once again in the company of General George Washington. The 46-year-old leader of the Continental Army showed few effects of his long winter at Valley Forge, though he regretted not having fared better during the recent New Jersey engagement.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Swift," he said, taking Alexander's hand in his own. "You did a fine job defending our chain at West Point." *

The Hudson chain, barring the river to British ships, was a favorite project of Washington's. Its efficacy in just a few short months was shown by the British attempt to destroy it and open the river once again to the Royal Navy.

*See "The Hudson Chain," *EQMM* September 1995

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"I only did what I had to," Swift said. As a civilian who often undertook special assignments for the army, his relationship with General Washington was somewhat special.

"At least it's one small victory for us this year."

"What news of Monmouth?"

"We should have won the battle. I made the error of shifting command from Lafayette to General Lee, and Lee let me down. I was forced to rebuke him publicly, on the battlefield. Lafayette and I slept together under a massive oak tree with our cloaks for covering, ready to attack at dawn, but by morning the British had slipped away."

A second adventure for Alexander Swift, and a new series for Edward D. Hoch! When an author gives birth to a new character it is often uncertain whether the life begun in one story will extend to others—an idea right for the character has got to germinate. The idea for "King George's Gold" came from author Hoch's discovery of a real-life contraption devised during the Revolutionary War years—an early submarine. †

"There will be other days, General."

"I feel the war is shifting to the south now. In my heart I wanted to retake New York by this summer. Ever since I allowed that city to fall to the British I have distrusted my own ability in the field."

"Things may not be as bleak as they seem," Swift tried to reassure him. "I have news from a spy in New York."

The general perked up at once. "Your wife?"

Alexander Swift felt a chill at the words. "No, she still lives with the British officer for whom she left me. I have had no word from her since our parting."

"Then what news have you?"

"A British frigate sank recently in the East River, a few miles north of the main harbor. It was carrying a cargo of gold valued at about a million American dollars. They will surely try to recover this gold for the war effort."

General Washington pondered his words. "Is there anything we can do to stop them?"

"One man alone might have a chance of slipping into the city."

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Washington knew what he meant. "You'll be shot as a spy if they catch you."

"I'll take my chances. New York is my city and I've been away from it too long. Do I have your permission, General?"

Washington turned away. "I tell you nothing, but if you go and if you happen to see Amanda, give her my fondest regards." He had spoken the name of Alexander Swift's estranged wife.

Although early July marked the second anniversary of the colonies' declaration of independence from England, there were no celebrations in the city of New York. The British army was firmly entrenched in the city that clustered around the southern tip of Manhattan Island. Crossing the Hudson by night in a small boat, Swift could see the old Dutch windmill still silhouetted against the campfires..

No guards challenged him or even noticed him as he pulled the rowboat ashore. Wearing his ordinary civilian clothes, Swift walked east on Wall Street to the corner of Broadway where the ruins of Trinity Church still remained after a disastrous fire two years earlier. Here he had a decision to make, knowing he was only a few blocks from the place that had been home to him. But he knew that trying to see Amanda would be foolish. Her British soldier would no doubt be with her. He was a man Swift had sworn to kill, but not now, not this night. Not until he had completed his mission.

Instead he headed north along Broadway, braving the night streets on foot rather than risk renting a horse at a posthouse. Even at this late hour he was fairly certain that the man he sought would be at the waterfront around South Street. He found him after an hour's search, in the Blue Boar tavern near the East River.

"Feeney," he said, speaking the man's last name softly so as not to be overheard.

Michael Feeney turned with a grin, barely concealing the razor-sharp knife as he pulled it from his sleeve. "My God! Alexander! What brings you to New York?" The knife slipped back as quickly as it had appeared.

"I received your message about the sunken frigate."

Feeney nodded, his ruddy Irish complexion reflecting the glow of the oil lamps. "I knew that would interest you." He was a man in his mid thirties, perhaps a few years older than Alexander, who'd

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had the misfortune of starting a new life in the colonies just at the time that they revolted and declared their independence. Never a friend of the English, he continued to live and work among the loyalists while supplying his friend with information. He'd told Swift once that he considered himself more of a gossip than a spy, but they both knew the English would hang him in a minute if his activities were ever discovered.

Alexander Swift glanced around at the others in the dimly lit tavern. Most were obviously British seamen, part of the supply route from the mother country. He was sure none could overhear him as he asked, "Are they going to try raising it?"

"Believe me, they want that gold. The troops need food and supplies, more than can be shipped from England. The gold bullion on board the *Freetown* could keep the war going for years. My information is that the ship is resting on a ledge of rock just below the water's surface. If they can keep it from sinking any deeper, the gold can be removed with relative ease."

"What caused the *Freetown* to go down?" Swift asked, pouring himself a drink from the bottle the bartender had set down before him.

"A northeaster hit just as she was coming into the river. Before they could get the sails furled it capsized her. My own opinion is that she must have been overloaded, though Captain Shay denies it."

"Not Randolph Shay?"

"None other! You know him, don't you?"

"We've met. He's the one who introduced Amanda to Major Jordan."

"Oh!"

Swift smiled ruefully. "I know. It was the beginning of bad times for my marriage."

"Will you try to see her while you're here?" Feeney asked.

"It would be a big mistake. If Major Jordan caught me I could be hanged as a spy—just like you. I have a feeling he'd like nothing better. It would save all the trouble of a divorce."

"What are you going to do about the *Freetown?*"

"Go look at it in the morning. Do you have an extra bed I could use?"

"Certainly. But be careful, Alexander."

At the first light of dawn, not long after five, Swift borrowed a

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horse from Feeney and rode north. He followed the familiar trail that hugged the shore of the East River, passing cultivated farmland and wooded areas before at last sighting the top of a mast protruding from the water. Almost at once he reined in his horse and took cover in the shelter of some pine trees. A pair of longboats moved out from shore toward the mast of the submerged frigate. There appeared to be six or eight men in each.

Swift cursed silently for arriving on the scene just a moment too late. He dismounted and dropped to the ground, crawling through the pine needles for a better view of the salvage operation. Behind him the horse whinnied a warning but he was too absorbed to understand. Suddenly a harsh voice spoke. "On your feet, laddie, before I poke you with me bayonet!"

"I was just—"

The British soldier jabbed him in the right buttock and Swift scrambled quickly to his feet. "That's better. You want to see what's going on, I'll give you a good view."

The first thing he saw as he was marched to the water's edge was a group of half a dozen British officers standing in a semicircle as they watched the progress of the longboats. The vessels were now tethered to the mast and two men from each boat dove into the water. They could stay under for a couple of minutes at most, and as each team surfaced a new team of divers replaced them.

Alexander Swift suddenly realized that one of the six officers standing on the shore wore the uniform of a captain in the King's Navy. Swift had never seen him with a beard before, but it took him only a moment to recognize Captain Randolph Shay, commander of the sunken frigate *Freetown*.

Shay, for his part, stepped forward at once. "Alexander! Can that be you?"

"It is, Captain. I was out for an early morning canter when I noticed the unusual activity up here."

"I'd heard you had deserted the city when the rebels were forced to retreat two years ago."

To admit to that was to admit he was a spy. "No, no. I've been here all along. What are you doing here?"

Captain Shay gestured toward the river. "My ship went down in that northeaster last week. We're trying to recover the cargo. I never knew a storm like that to hit this area in early July. It caught us with our sails fully rigged."

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"Good luck with the recovery," Swift said, turning away. With a bit of luck he might be able to bluff his way out of this.

But it was not a day for luck.

"Seize that man!" one of the army officers ordered. "He is a spy."

Alexander Swift whirled to face his accuser as firm hands gripped his arms. Though he'd only seen him twice before, he now recognized the face of the handsome major who stood with the others, pointing an accusing finger at his chest. "Major Jordan, isn't it? My regards to you, sir, and to Amanda, my wife. I trust she is in good health."

"He fled the city more than a year ago to be with Washington," Jordan announced. "I will testify against him."

At that moment he was interrupted by a shout from one of the boats. An officer in command of the recovery team was calling out to shore.

"What is it?" Captain Shay shouted in response. "Say again."

"There is no gold on board here. The ship's hold is empty!"

Alexander Swift was taken back to British Army headquarters in lower Manhattan. He was questioned by a captain he'd never seen before and then left alone for more than an hour. Finally, when the door opened again, it was not the captain but Major Jack Jordan who entered. Seeing him in this room lit only by the morning sun, Swift could view him as Amanda might. He was handsome, certainly, but Swift's wife had never been one to be impressed merely by physical appearances. Perhaps there was something more, some sort of animal magnetism that Swift himself lacked. He'd been faithful during their time together, and even since their separation he'd found comfort only a few times in the arms of a barmaid named Molly who lived near the American garrison at West Point.

Staring now at this handsome British major, he spoke the words that had hovered in his mind since their meeting by the sunken frigate. "I always thought I'd kill you if we met again, Major."

"Killing a British officer is a hanging offense. But then, so is spying."

He sat down across the table from Swift. "Amanda will be put through a great deal of torment as a result of your returning to New York, Swift."

"Release me and she need never know."

"Right now we have much larger problems than you. A valuable

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shipment of King George's gold has disappeared from that wrecked frigate."

"Someone simply got there first. I understand that looting wrecked ships for their cargo is not unknown along the English coast."

Major Jordan shook his head. "We had guards there ever since the wreck, day and night. No one went near it."

"Perhaps the bullion was removed earlier, on the high seas, and transferred to another ship."

"Such a thing would involve a major conspiracy of Captain Shay and the entire crew. It's out of the question."

Alexander Swift took a deep breath. "Release me and perhaps I can find the missing gold. I have a number of contacts on the waterfront."

Jordan snorted at the suggestion. "Find it for which side?"

"If I find it, you have my word that the gold will not go to the Continental Army."

This promise brought a laugh from Major Jordan. "The word of a man who has sworn to kill me?"

"What happened over my wife is another matter entirely. I will deal with that in due time. Right now you want your gold—"

"King George's gold," he corrected.

"—King George's gold. And I want my freedom."

Major Jordan stood up. "Let me discuss this with my superiors. I will return shortly."

Alexander Swift had a suspicion no superiors would hear of their conversation. Jordan had already decided on a course of action beyond British law. He had seen the flash of excitement in the man's eyes and could guess what it meant. He would be turned loose to find the missing gold, with Jordan's men close behind him. If he failed to find it, he could be killed for trying to escape. If by some miracle he found it, Jordan would take the gold himself and still kill him.

Major Jordan returned in thirty minutes and told him, "You will have twenty-four hours of freedom, carefully supervised. If you attempt to leave New York, you will be killed. If you attempt to contact any of Washington's spies, you will be killed. Find the missing bullion, deliver it to me, and I will guarantee your freedom."

"Fair enough," Swift replied, not believing him for a minute.

Jordan took a gold watch from his pocket and opened the cover.

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"Report back to me at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning."

"I have just one request. I would like to speak with Captain Randolph Shay if he's still in the building."

"That can be arranged. We are just completing our questioning of him. You may speak with him before he leaves."

There was more waiting until Swift was finally escorted to an upstairs office shortly after noon. Captain Shay sat at a desk looking tired and depressed. "Well, Swift! So even the enemy has an opportunity to question me now."

"We were friends at one time, Captain. I still don't consider us enemies, even though our countries may be at war."

"The rebellious colonies are not a country."

Swift ignored the remark and said, "I've agreed to help Major Jordan investigate the disappearance of cargo from your frigate. Tell me, did you observe the gold being loaded yourself?"

"Damned right, I did!" He chose a sheet of paper from the desk and passed it across to Alexander. "This is the *Freetown*'s manifest. She carried a sealed cargo of His Majesty's bullion in the hold. Gold ingots and bags of gold coins weighing the equivalent of three thousand pounds. A million in gold and we used it as ballast!"

"There was no interception or boarding on the high seas?"

Shay scoffed at the suggestion. "The *Freetown* was a heavily armed frigate, able to withstand any attack with a fusillade of cannonballs. Finest ship I ever commanded. Only the finest would be entrusted with the king's gold."

"But she went down in the East River."

"An act of God, certainly," the captain replied. "It was early morning and we had no warning of the storm. We'd sailed in through Long Island Sound and had turned into the East River at its northern end. There was a gust of wind when the storm hit and we went over like a straw man."

Swift glanced at the manifest. There was no doubt the gold had been loaded on board, just as there was no doubt the hold was now empty. Though the ship had gone over on its side as it took on water and sank, it was now resting almost upright — enough to show the top of its mainmast.

"Were any of your crew lost?"

"Eight able seamen drowned, good men all."

Alexander Swift nodded, getting to his feet and returning the manifest to Shay. "I may want to speak to some of your officers."

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"They're available."

Swift left him alone in the room, thinking that he would not want to be Randolph Shay, facing probable court-martial for the loss of his warship and a fortune in gold.

He held his breath as he stepped outside and walked past the uniformed guards with their rifles held at port arms. No one challenged him. He was free for the moment.

Swift spent most of the afternoon shaking off two men dressed as seamen who'd started following him as soon as he left British headquarters. Finally he'd been forced to grab onto the side of a passing carriage and ride away unseen, leaving them standing in the center of the muddy street. He pictured Jordan's face when he learned that Alexander Swift had now disappeared along with King George's gold.

Once he was certain no one else was on his trail, he headed directly for South Street and the tavern where he knew Michael Feeney could be found in the late afternoon. The Irishman was off in his corner, and he raised a hand in greeting to Swift. "I had heard bad news about you, that you'd been taken by the British."

"All true, but I talked my way out of it. The next time I may not be so lucky."

"Some say the gold is gone."

"That it is. Their divers say the hold is empty."

"A curious turn of events."

"I've been set free until eleven tomorrow morning to find the gold."

Feeney merely grinned. "Like setting a fox to keep the geese."

"Look, I need your help."

"To get out of New York?"

"No, I can always steal a boat for that. Do you know a man named David Bushnell?"

His eyes narrowed to slits. "You're talking about one of Washington's secret weapons."

"I need him now, tonight if possible."

"He's not in the city. I think he's somewhere in New Jersey."

"Can you find him?"

"Not Bushnell himself, but I know Ezra Lee, an army sergeant who works with him. Their first missions failed, but they're anxious to try again."

"I might give them that chance."

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"Can you be back here by ten o'clock?"

"Yes, and do your best, Michael. If you cannot find him by then, we must give it up."

It was dangerous for Swift to prowl the streets during the early evening hours, and even more dangerous to spend the time in a tavern or grogshop. British troops were everywhere, as were loyalists ready to report him if he was recognized. Strangely enough, the safest place for him was probably his wife's new home. Amanda may have cuckolded him, but she would never betray him to the British, not even to Jordan.

He had heard some time back that they were living together in a house on John Street, just off Broadway. The July evening was still bright with sunlight when he reached it, and he stood for a time in a doorway across the street, watching for any sign of movement. He was debating whether to risk approaching the front door when Amanda herself appeared, walking quickly along the road with an open parasol shielding her from the sun.

Even if it meant his capture, he had no choice but to approach her. "Amanda!"

She turned quickly at the sound of her name and the color drained from her face. She was as lovely as he remembered, with great green eyes like windows to her soul. "Alex! Don't you know they're looking for you? Jack says you betrayed his trust."

"I haven't yet. I'll be in his office tomorrow morning as promised."

"Come in. If you're seen on the street by his soldiers you might be shot."

"I hoped you'd let me stay until dark if Jordan isn't here."

She unlocked the door and led him into a small house that was better than the one they'd shared. "It belonged to a lawyer who fled the city," she explained. "Jack was able to get it for us."

"There was a time I said I'd kill him. And perhaps you too."

A smile played at her lips. She unbuttoned the neck of her blouse, baring her throat. "It's yours for the cutting if that's what you want."

Alexander sighed. "What happened to us, Amanda?"

"A revolution changed our lives."

"Do you really love the British that much?"

Her green eyes glistened. "I love Jack Jordan. That's the important thing. Don't tell me you haven't found someone to love since we parted!"

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He ignored the question she wasn't quite asking. Instead he asked one of his own. "What will you do when the British lose the war, when Jordan is forced to return to England?"

"That's not going to—"

She was interrupted by a pounding on the front door. For an instant Swift feared he'd been tracked down by Major Jordan's men. "Don't open it!" he begged her.

"I must. It could be a message from Jack."

Swift ducked behind a drapery as she opened the door, revealing a middle-aged man with a dark, weathered complexion. "Please let me in!" he gasped. "I've been hurt."

Then he fell at her feet and they both saw the blood on the back of his shirt.

"He's dead," Swift told her after a moment's examination. "Stabbed in the back."

"But who is he? I've never seen him before," Amanda protested. "This isn't the jungle. Men aren't murdered on one's doorstep!"

"Apparently this one was." He glanced out at the stoop. "There's a trail of blood on the steps but virtually none in the street. He was stabbed just as he reached here and started up the steps."

"He may have been looking for Jack, thinking he'd be home by now." She took a deep breath. "I must summon help. There are usually sentries on duty at Broadway."

"Do what you have to. I'll be gone when you return."

She lingered only a moment, casting a sideways glance at him, perhaps forming words in her mind that were left unspoken. Then she was out the door, leaving it ajar as she ran down the street seeking help.

Swift decided to exit through the back door, but he paused long enough to go through the dead man's pockets. He came quickly upon papers identifying him as one Roscoe Newcastle, naval lieutenant and first mate aboard the H.M.S. *Freetown*. He returned the papers to Newcastle's pocket and went quickly through the back door, crossing a small garden to Maiden Lane.

He had no idea why Lieutenant Newcastle had been murdered, but he was pretty certain it was connected to the disappearance of the gold from the sunken frigate. It was still too soon to meet Feeney back at the Blue Boar, so he roamed the waterfront for a couple of hours, watching schooners unloading supplies for the troops, until finally the fading light brought a halt till morning.

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When he reached the tavern he found Feeney seated with a slender young man at his usual table. "This is Sergeant Ezra Lee of the Continental Army. Sergeant Lee, meet Alexander Swift, the personal representative of General Washington."

The young man smiled. "Pleased to meet you, sir."

"Feeney tells me you work with David Bushnell."

"That I do, sir. Took the *Turtle* into New York harbor all by myself and damned near sank a British warship."

"Not the *Freetown?"*

"No, sir. I had nothing to do with that."

"But you and Bushnell do have a vessel that can travel under water?" Swift asked.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Bushnell, he invented and built it. Calls it the *Turtle.* It's an egg-shaped craft propelled by screw-like devices operated by hand. You open a valve to admit sea water into a ballast tank. That causes it to sink. When you want to raise it again you empty the tank with a hand pump. Of course there's lead ballast in the bottom to keep it upright."

"Ballast," Swift repeated, trying to capture a thought that had flashed through his mind. "How long can the *Turtle* remain under water?"

"Only about thirty minutes because we have no underwater supply of oxygen. But we have a breathing tube we can use when the vessel is close to the water's surface. That way I was able to sneak into New York harbor."

"Why you and not Bushnell?"

"The man's an engineer, plenty of brains but not much strength in his arms. Look at these!" He held up his own well-muscled arms to demonstrate. "I had to propel the *Turtle* forward turning those screws by hand. That's hard work after the first few minutes. But I made it to the British warship *Eagle,* which was our target. I came in right next to the hull and started drilling a hole to attach a gunpowder bomb I carried with me. But a band of copper sheathing defeated me. The bomb bobbed to the surface and the time fuse exploded it harmlessly. The *Turtle* came up too, and I managed to escape with it. This was nearly two years ago and we've had two more failures since then. We could use a successful mission."

That was what Alexander Swift wanted to hear. "Can you take me to the wreck of the *Freetown?"*

"No, sir."

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"Why not?"

"The *Turtle* is a one-man craft. There's no room for the two of us."

Swift cursed silently. Somehow he had to examine that ship. "Could I operate it myself?"

"With enough practice."

"We've got till dawn," he told the sergeant. "Can you teach me?"

"Let me see your arm." He felt Alexander's muscles. "Maybe," he answered, a bit dubiously.

"Where is it now?"

"Hidden north of Manhattan Island. Not too far from your wreck. You can come down the East River if your arms hold out."

"Let's do it."

Swift's first sight of the *Turtle* was anything but promising. It looked like a large egg with a pod of some sort fixed to its back and rudder and screws projecting in various directions. Its hull of oak staves was reinforced with iron bands to help withstand the water pressure. "What's the pod for?" he asked.

"The explosives. It's detachable once you fix it to the hull of a vessel."

"All right," Alexander said with some distaste. "Let's get it into the water and I'll climb inside."

Michael Feeney had come up the river with them, helping to row past the sentries in the darkness. The site of the sunken frigate was still under guard, and it was those guards Swift hoped to outwit by approaching the vessel underwater. Now Feeney helped Swift and Lee get the craft into the water. The two of them helped Swift clamber into the cramped quarters and Lee set about teaching him the use of the controls.

"You have lateral and vertical screw propellers that work by hand, and this rudder to steer with."

Feeney was holding a lantern to illuminate the scene and Swift had him shift it a bit so he had a better view of the controls as Sergeant Lee pointed them out. "What's this?"

"The hand pump to empty the ballast tank when you want to surface. This is a breathing tube, but you can only use it when the craft is partly above water. It closes automatically when the vessel is submerged."

"How do I see where I'm going?"

"There are small windows around the top, in this little dome.

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And the depth gauge and compass are marked with foxfire so they can be read in the dark."

Swift practiced in the dark, waiting for the first lightening of the eastern sky before setting forth. As he learned, the sergeant told him about David Bushnell. "He's a frail man, poor fellow, but a genius at mechanics. He could not afford to enter Yale until he was thirty-one, so it was seventeen seventy-five before he graduated. He and his brother built the *American Turtle,* as he first named it, during his final vacation and demonstrated it for Ben Franklin. In September of 'seventy-six, after the British drove Washington from the city, David decided to destroy Lord Howe's flagship, the *Eagle,* at anchor off Staten Island.

"He lacked the stamina to operate his submarine, as he calls it, himself. When his brother fell ill, I was enlisted for the mission. Sadly, I'd had too little training. This screw to attach the 150-pound powder charge to the ship hit a metal strap and failed to penetrate the wood. The submarine bobbed to the surface and as dawn broke a boatload of British sailors set off in pursuit. I set the bomb free and the timing mechanism blew it up, frightening the British. I escaped, but the mission was a failure."

"It was a good try," Swift assured him. He could see the first traces of dawn in the sky.

"I wish you better luck in your effort."

Swift asked a few more questions about screwing the bomb to its target and then set off shortly before dawn. It was hard work cranking the screws that propelled the vessel through the water. He kept the small portholes above the surface until finally the main mast of the sunken *Freetown* came into view. Then he let water into the ballast tank and submerged.

By the dawn's eerie light he found himself in a strange new world. The East River water was reasonably clear so he had a good view of the frigate itself, resting on a shelf of rock just beneath the water's surface. The big sails were mainly furled, with only a few of the smaller ones spread. The hold was open and enough morning sunlight penetrated to show him it was empty. He steered the *Turtle* around with difficulty, using the rudder and screw, trying to see what lay beyond the ledge on which the frigate rested. All he knew was that it seemed deep.

He steered in a little closer and used the drill mounted at the top of his craft. His first try was a failure, but within a half-hour he had attached the gunpowder bomb to the ship's side and set

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the clockwork mechanism needed to explode it.

Then it was a matter of getting away fast. He used both hands to operate the screw that drove the craft, and both were sore before he was far enough away to safely pump out the ballast and begin to rise. He looked back through a porthole just in time to see a fountain of water rise in the air and feel the shock waves from the blast. When the water settled, the main mast of the *Freetown* was no longer visible. On shore he could see guards scrambling for cover, not knowing what to expect next.

Alexander Swift was grinning as he headed back to the *Turtle*'s hiding place. So far, it had been a successful morning.

At exactly eleven A.M. Swift rode up to British Army headquarters in New York and allowed a sentry on duty to take his horse. He was escorted into Major Jordan's office and sat waiting for some minutes before Amanda's lover appeared. "Well, Swift, I didn't expect to see you back here after your disappearance yesterday."

"I keep my word, sir."

"This whole business of the missing gold has taken a bad turn. Captain Shay's first mate, a Lieutenant Newcastle, was stabbed to death last night at my front door. Amanda was terrified, as you can imagine. We have no idea what he was doing there, but it seems it must be connected to the gold. I've just been speaking with Captain Shay about it. He came in this morning as soon as he heard."

Alexander nodded. "The situation seems clear to me, Major. If you are prepared to release me without charges I may be of some help in bringing this matter to a conclusion."

"You know where King George's gold is?"

"I believe so."

"What about the killing of Lieutenant Newcastle?"

"I believe one answer will explain both questions."

Suddenly the door of the room burst open. Captain Shay stood there, his face contorted in anger. "I have just been informed there has been an explosion aboard the *Freetown!* She has sunk further into the river!"

"What's that?" Jordan was on his feet. He whirled toward Swift. "Do you know anything about this?"

Alexander shrugged. "How could I?"

"Where is the gold?" the major challenged. "Tell me that!"

"Will I go free if I tell you?"

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Jordan hesitated and then responded. "Yes."

"It is right where Captain Shay hid it."

Shay leaped at him with renewed fury. "I'll kill you, you meddling Yankee!"

Jordan shouted for the guards and the captain was quickly subdued.

"Take him away," the major ordered. "I'll deal with him after I hear from Mr. Swift."

Alexander resumed his seat. "Thank you, sir."

"Are you telling me that Captain Shay stole that cargo?"

"I am. He told us his ship was fully rigged when the storm hit, but why would it be so rigged sailing inland waters? I dived to examine it myself and discovered that he'd lied. The large sails were all furled as they should have been."

"Then what caused the ship to capsize?"

"My question exactly," Swift agreed. "Then I remembered he also said the three thousand pounds of weight in gold ingots and coins was used as ballast on the voyage. A heavy cargo is often used as ballast to save the additional weight of lead ballast. But if that gold ballast had been moved during the voyage, taken above the water line, even above the main deck, the stability of the frigate would have been seriously compromised. A strong wind could have capsized the *Freetown* with very little effort. I'm certain that is what happened."

"Where could it be above the main deck?"

"I suspect in the captain's own cabin, and the first mate's. No crew members would dare venture in there."

"You're telling me that Captain Shay and Newcastle moved that gold out of the ship's hold and up to their own cabins? Three thousand pounds of it? Impossible!"

"It seems impossible when you state it like that. But gold is a very heavy metal. Two officers' cabins would easily hold it, though moving around in them might be difficult. As for carrying it up, they could do a little each day—a bag or two of coins, an ingot on every trip. One or two crew members might have helped. Perhaps they conveniently drowned in the storm. That was no doubt what frightened Newcastle enough to bring him to your door last night. Captain Shay caught up with him on your steps and silenced him."

Major Jordan made some quick notes. "If it happened like that, some of the surviving crew must have noticed something suspi-

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cious. But what would Shay have done when the ship docked without its cargo of gold."

"He could claim it was never loaded. By the time word got back to England he'd have found a way to smuggle the gold out of his cabin and onto shore. He'd be in the New World with a million in gold, vanished before you knew what happened."

Jordan's eyes narrowed. "You said you dived down to look at those sails. You could have placed a gunpowder charge at the same time."

"Don't you think it's more likely Captain Shay did that to cover up his crime? If the frigate was salvaged, the gold would surely have been found in his cabin. He'd rather have it at the bottom of the river."

Jordan took a deep breath. "Remain here," he said quietly as he left the office. It was a full half-hour before he returned.

"Well?" Alexander asked him.

"You did very well. Captain Shay has made a full confession, admitting he stole the gold and killed Newcastle to keep him from talking. The gold was carried up piece by piece and hidden in a spare ammunition locker near his cabin. The locker usually held extra cannonballs, which they dumped overboard to make room for the gold."

"Then I was wrong about the cabin."

"Yes, and he denies causing this morning's explosion on the sunken ship. We're looking into that."

"May I leave now?"

Jordan hesitated, then waved a hand in dismissal. "Be gone from here. I am a man of my word. The next time we meet, I may not be so generous."

"The next time we meet—" Alexander left the sentence unfinished as he walked out the door. There would be other times to settle their personal business. For now, he only wanted to get back to General Washington and report on the success of his mission. ●

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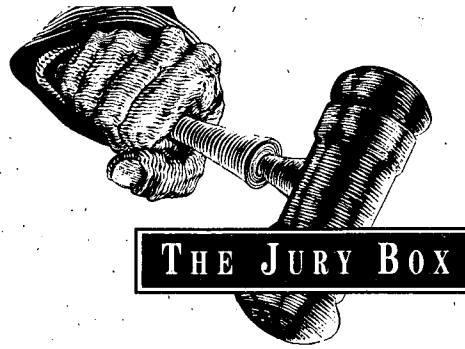

by Jon L. Breen

At least since the late Lillian de la Torre began recounting the criminal investigations of Dr. Samuel Johnson in these pages over fifty years ago, mystery writers have been transforming historical figures into fictional detectives. The person from history who has inspired the greatest variety of writers to this form of homage is quite likely either Arthur Conan Doyle or Edgar Allan Poe, whose latest such appearance is this month's extraordinary lead item. The numerical champ among non-mystery writers is probably Theodore Roosevelt, who has been fictionalized by writers as varied as Mark Schorr, Caleb Carr, William L. DeAndrea, Brian Garfield (not precisely in a mystery), and (in a series of books) Lawrence Alexander, but not far behind must be Benjamin Franklin, who figured in one of the first factional detective novels, Theodore Mathieson's *The Devil and Ben Franklin* (1961), subsequently returned to detection in Donald Zochert's *Murder in the Hellfire Club* (1978), and is the subject of at least two current series, one of short stories and another of novels.

**** Stephen Marlowe: *The Lighthouse at the End of the World*, Dutton, $23.95. Telling his own story most of the way, Poe begins in 1849 Baltimore where he is enrolled as a paid voter, flashes back to his married life with his teenage cousin Virginia, visits 1832 Paris where he encounters Alexandre Dumas and his own ostensibly fictional detective C. Auguste Dupin, and takes the reader on a challenging tour of mystery, fantasy, biography, and alcoholic psychology. This is a remarkable novel, beautifully written, cunningly constructed, and so dense with subtle clues and allusions

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that it demands a second reading.

*** Robert Lee Hall: *Murder by the Waters*, St. Martin's, $21.95. The fifth account of Ben Franklin's days representing colonial interests in London takes him and his young Watson (and son) Nick Hardy on a 1758 coach journey to Bath, an adventure marked by a highwayman's appearance en route. The murder plot is closely connected to the romantic quadrangle: Which of three suitors (at least) will win the lovely Emma Morland? As first shown in *Exit Sherlock Holmes* (1977), Hall is a master of period detection.

*** Richard W. Moquist: *The Franklin Mysteries*, Northwest Publishing, 6906 South 300 West, Salt Lake City, Utah 84047; $8.95. I missed this trade paperback on its 1994 appearance, but happily it's still available. The nine stories take place in Philadelphia of the 1780s, where a more aged Franklin (but recognizably the same guy) is again equipped with a youthful Watson, in this case nephew Constable Wendell Franklin. Distinguished more for their style and historical tidbits than their puzzle plots, the tales form a most enjoyable group. "The Mystery of the Debtor's Prison" is especially nicely done.

**** Ruth Rendell: *Simisola*, Crown, $23. Chief Inspector Wexford looks for the missing daughter of his African immigrant doctor and confronts both a complex crime puzzle and the problems of British unemployment and race relations. This novel has all the style, social observation, character-building, and deft plotting you expect from its author. Some early reviews have branded it lesser Rendell — maybe so, but that just means she's even farther ahead of the mystery-writing pack than I thought.

*** Kay Hooper: *Amanda*, Bantam, $19.95. The dubious claimant is usually a sure-fire suspense situation as in this tale of a young woman who returns (or does she?) to the old Southern mansion called Glory, asserting her identity as Amanda Daulton, granddaughter of dying family patriarch Jesse. Though he accepts her, other family members are suspicious and doubt her claim of having no interest in his fortune. This is solid romantic suspense, somewhat like a Phyllis A. Whitney novel augmented with explicit and frequent sexual encounters. No restoration comedy ever tied up the strands more patly at the end.

*** Andrew Vachss: *Footsteps of the Hawk*, Knopf, $23. Though the child-advocate author is noted for gloves-off realism — he's your guy if you find Jim

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Thompson, Mickey Spillane, Thomas Harris, and Joe Lansdale just too darn cozy and optimistic — urban Robin Hood Burke is no more ultimately believable than his forest or Wild West equivalents. Vachss is a quotable writer with a high "listen-to-this" ratio, as when he observes that calling a malt liquor Crazy Horse is "[r]eal classy, like naming a vodka after Chernobyl" (page 61) or notes that in New York, "PTA groups are more worried about the metal detectors' working than whether their kids are learning to read" (page 62).

*** Robert K. Tanenbaum: *Corruption of Blood,* Dutton, $22.95. Once counsel to a Congressional committee investigating the John F. Kennedy assassination, the author puts his series lawyer Butch Karp into the same role. Though the mix of fact and fiction is not totally successful, the first two sentences will grip the attention of assassination buffs, and series regulars will want to know the latest doings of Butch and wife Marlene, whose quirky, sometimes uncommunicative relationship is as exasperating as ever.

*** Sara Paretsky: *Windy City Blues*, Delacorte, $19.95. Nine stories about private eye V.I. Warshawski, written between 1982 and 1995, lead off with the previously unpublished "Grace Notes." Though author and character fare better at novel length, they are always welcome company. Best thing in the book is the ten-page non-fiction introduction, a loving Chicago travelogue — I especially enjoyed Paretsky's explanation for being a south-side Cubs fan.

** Dexter Dias: *False Witness*, Mysterious, $19.95. Barrister Tom Fawley defends a disabled schlock novelist accused of lewd behavior (admitted) and the heinous murder of a teenage girl (denied). His investigation turns up some weird cultic ritual in the English small-town locale. While this first novel can't be wholeheartedly recommended—the plot is as silly as it is complicated; some of the exposition-in-dialogue is awkward; and lawyer-novel cliches abound—some ingenious turns of phrase suggest a talented writer with a bright future.

If your interest in mystery goes beyond the casual, you'll find much to enjoy in a videotape of the Bouchercon 25 awards speeches (Chrysolithos Video Productions, 3408 158th St. SW, Lynnwood, WA 98037; $20). Holding forth from the dais at the 1994 Seattle event are toastmaster George C. Chesbro, Pro Guest of Honor Marcia Muller, Lifetime Achievement Award winner Tony Hillerman, and Fan Guest of Honor Art Scott.

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

BLOODLINES

by Jan Cullen

"I live in an apartment in San Francisco crammed with old books," says Jan Cullen. "I am eclectic in my collection, but do have a case filled with true crime stories which a friend calls 'Killer Corner.' " As a source of ideas for her first fiction, the histories of two notorious criminals came in handy.

If you gaze at Lizzie you will not see the frisson of excited anticipation tingling up her spine. If you listen carefully, you will not hear the thumpity thump thump of her heart. You will not even know that she is dead. Whatever your idea of heaven is, I firmly believe that this is not it. What you will see is a youngish woman of indeterminate age, twenty-five or so on a good day, thirty-five or forty in direct sunlight. (And the sunlight in this stratified realm can be very direct.) She is a little bit more fleshy than is fashionable, even up here. The lack of calories in the abundant and decadent food has not seemed to affect her unfortunate tendency to corpulence. Her pudgy fingers wear only a simple gold ring that has somehow come back to her from her father. It seems that the second thing he did after arrival was to deposit it with those who take care of such things. The first thing was to have some cranial and facial repair work done.

Lizzie is sitting in her rather opulent Victorian parlor waiting for her first date with Jack. She is not quite sure who he is, but it was this very fact that piqued her curiosity when he contacted her through the heavenly community organization that matches people

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on the basis of similar earthly experiences. Sometimes this method brings tears of joyful reminiscence, sometimes tears of pure horror at the divergence of historical fact and personal recollection. Lizzie lifts her silver-filigreed hand mirror to examine her face, though not too closely. She sees her reddish brown hair, brushed, as always, up in a bun, with a few wispy tendrils escaping to frame her round and slightly mottled face. Her light hazel eyes have darkened over the years (or is it decades or centuries?) the secrets they hold weighing down the color. Yet the gold specks of laughter still lighten their darkest corners. Her nose is pert in the middle of her face; her one delicate feature, useful for ladylike sniffs and the inhaling of smelling salts. Her mouth is wide and sensual, and no matter how primly she sets her lips she cannot hide a certain smirking mirth overlaying hidden lust and passion.

She puts the mirror down on a table crowded with family portraits. Father, mother, sister neatly boxed in ornate frames. Only her stepmother is absent. She wonders aimlessly if her stepmother too is up here somewhere and what she would say if ever she had the misfortune to bump into her accidentally, or even, heaven forbid!, walk through her. Her father has avoided all her attempts to contact him, as has her mother, and she does not even know who is together with whom or in what form. She twists the gold ring around on her little finger and sighs.

Somewhere in a seedier district of this strange afterworld Jack is grinning at his reflection in the broken looking glass swinging crookedly but gently from a bent nail in a parlor wall. The paint is cracked, the wallpaper peeling, but Jack is unaware of anything but his own white teeth sparkling in his wide-mouthed smile. Even up (down?) here, so few people know that he is THE Jack, THAT Jack. His small reddish brown moustache twitches with amusement. He may be short in physical stature but he casts a long shadow throughout every dimension. He smoothes back his hair and places his peaked cap jauntily on his head. He winks at himself, his eyes of indeterminate color asparkle with adventures to come. "Lizzie," he thinks. "What a lark! I knew a Lizzie in the old times, for a short while anyway. Wonder if anyone calls this one Long Liz. Wonder if this one's heart beats in time with mine, pumping all that lovely blood, lovely salty blood!" Now his heart is going thumpity thump thump. His tongue caresses his upper lip as he leaves his lair. He closes the front door, softly chuckling to himself.

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The fog swirls around his ankles as he strides down the misty streets. He is in his element. He is electric. He is invisible.

If any of you dear readers are frightened for our Lizzie as Jack approaches let me reassure you that she can take care of herself. Let me also explain a little about this world our hero and our heroine find themselves in. Feelings may be real, thoughts may be substantive, but little else is. We tend to bring our pasts with us wherever we go. Some of us love our little earthly beings so entirely that we recreate them over and over in endless circles of repetitive action. We delight in familiar places, familiar faces, familiar games. Even our adventures, in which we feel we tread boldly and courageously into new territory, take place in these same circles. Others of us leave our little earthly beings behind and are swept on the wings of angels into a new realm that is unlike anything you could ever imagine, or I could ever describe. Our Jack and our Lizzie, being of the first group, have experienced little change in either their exterior or interior furnishings. But whatever the consequences of their meeting for them, there is little for others; for here there is no death. Here salt of the blood on your tongue is of your own creation. Here you live your own myth. Close to God? Close to the other fellow? Is there a God? Is there another fellow? No time to answer, or our story will unfold without us.

The doorbell rings. Jack stands, tongue caressing the fullness of his lips, finger caressing steel, waiting for the prick, the droplet of blood, the culmination of patience, of planning. Oh, Jack is if nothing else a patient man. Through days and nights he lurks just to the left of our consciousness, waiting, knowing that in the dark night of our souls we will come to him, our pale throats an offering to his passion. In the morning we will speak our horror, deny him. But in those nights we moan in the heat of our tired and humiliated mortality. We stretch our hands, spread our legs to feel alive in a lust mingled inextricably with death. And so he feeds well at the banquet of our suppressed desire. Jack waits at the door. He brings his finger to his mouth, tastes the droplet of blood, and smiles at the sudden rush of heat through his loins. He savors taste, heat, power. "Ah, Jack, me pretty boy," he thinks, "love is coming to answer the door. Tonight we will give ourselves to life."

Lizzie smiles. She feels Jack's heat seeping through the keyhole. She checks the mirror one last time and bites on her lips to redden them. She smoothes down the front of her bodice, letting her fingers linger perhaps a little too long on her breasts. The dying rays of

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the setting sun filter through the stained glass in the massive front door, making indistinguishable patterns on the hardwood floor. She walks coyly through the colors, much as a piece of cheese would walk, if it had legs, in the direction of a seemingly friendly mouse. She places her hand on the ornate brass doorknob. She pauses for a moment as if blinded by the simple gold ring on her little finger. The brass doorknob begins to reverberate in her hand, sending eager shocks through her entire nervous system. She turns it, pulls slowly, and feasts her eyes on the gentleman standing before her. He takes his finger, still a little moist from blood and saliva, and traces the jawline of her face, lingering for a loving moment on her throat just to the left of her adam's apple. She thinks he is perhaps a bit quick to caress her but does not push his hand away. She has turned to him too many nights before in that breathless dream-filled space somewhere past awake but not quite into sleep.

His stature short, still his presence fills her doorway and enters her rooms before she has invited him in. His eyes bring her inside of him and she fancies she can feel the warmth of his blood tickling her skin. She smiles her demure little smile and finds it reflected in the width of his grin. Their eyes lock in anticipation.

"Come in, Jack, while I gather my belongings," she says and turns as gracefully as she can.

"Sure thing, Lizzie, my pet," he replies, restraining his hands so that he does not grab her from behind and end the evening before it has even begun. He follows her in and sits himself down on the ebony horsehair sofa, brushing his hand over a brownish patch that looks as if it has been impatiently yet repeatedly wiped. He waits while she gathers flowered shawl and flowered bonnet and flowered reticule. He likes flowers, does our Jack, for he knows how their crushed and shredded petals render their sweetest scent. Finally she stands before him, eagerly ready for whatever he has to offer.

" 'Tis quite the beauty you are! I thought we'd be off for a dinner of steak washed down with the reddest wine, and then leave the rest to our whimsy. Does that suit you, me girlie?"

Lizzie nods, "It sounds quite delectable, kind sir." Her voice sounds constricted in her throat in contrast to his cockney exuberances, yet the undertones resonate on the same note.

Off they go into the starless night. Not even moonshine to light their way. Somehow this is what they prefer. They find comfort in inky darkness lit dimly by the blurred yellowish glow of flickering

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gas lamps. On Jack's side of the pavement the still-swirling fog obscures him even more. Their conversation is sparse and not of interest to anyone but themselves, being of the same banality we all engage in when first introduced to a stranger. No matter how our personalities intersect, no matter how we feel we have known the other forever, there are still those irrelevancies we feel impelled to exchange. And so they saunter, arm in arm, smelling each other out with their words, while their fantastical imaginings fly to other things. Their appearance is that of any couple you might see strolling down any street in any town. Perhaps that couple you saw last night in your own town? Yet their reality is that of the heightened senses of fever victims, madwomen, and those who are on the swordpoint of death.

Finally they turn a crooked corner onto infamous Corset Street, barely a halfpenny toss from Miller's Court. They step together into Mrs. Ringer's, more formally known as The Britannia. Previously a publick house, it has in latter days started serving various grades of beef to all comers. It is a dusky place of muted colors and dark corners. Sawdust covers the floor. The sound of voices mingles with honky-tonk piano. Somewhere a plate clatters to the floor, somewhere near a woman shrieks. Jack sees the pubs of his glorious past. Lizzie sees something more akin to an afternoon tearoom on Fall River's Main Street. Mostly, they see each other. A thin, spidery silver-haired maître d' guides them to their table. Jack sits heavily, feet planted firmly on the floor, head thrown back to draw in the mingled smells of frying flesh and ladies' perfume. Lizzie perches in her self-consciously feminine manner on the edge of her chair. She scans the restaurant's patrons hoping, as always, to catch sight of her dearly beloved father. Not seeing him, she returns her attention to her delectable beau.

"Jack," she whispers, distracting his attention from the pictures reeling around in his head. "Thank you for bringing me here."

He slips his long-fingered yet somehow ironically gentle hand under her skirts, patting her pantaloon-covered dimpled knee in a friendly yet enticing manner. " 'Tis only the warming of the first of the senses, my little smooth-necked nightingale."

Oh how she has been taught to be offended at that hand on her knee. Oh how her breath catches in her throat and tightens at the sudden pain of loss when he takes it away. The blood rushes to her cheeks and her eyes dart quickly from side to side until they are certain that the darkness of the room offers protection to her

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appearance of sanitized virginity. Her cheeks pale once again, but her sigh of relief is hot and misty and Jack grins as he feels its caress. Jack is home. Jack is hungry. Jack is waiting.

The honey-haired waitress appears listlessly at the side of the table. Jack sees a buxom wench, laces half undone, breasts as plump and firm as they are eager. Lizzie's eyes rest on a thin, corseted woman, sexlessly subservient. Jack's caressing voice orders, "Two steaks, rare, and a bottle of dark red wine." The wench, listless no more, arches her back, pushing her bosom even closer to the top of her bodice. As her body temperature begins to rise, her tongue licks rounded beads of perspiration off her upper lip, unknowingly smearing her ruby lip rouge. She hastens back to the steamy kitchen where she finds herself urgently giving the cook more than just the order.

Lizzie is, of course, oblivious to all this. Her quiet demure waitress has just nodded her head to the request she has heard for lemon tea, cucumber sandwiches, and cream cakes. How much we have created our own world by our thoughts and feelings while we were still earthbound, flesh-encased creatures. How much more can we create it once we are free from those constricting laws of Newton and Darwin, and nature bends to our will instead of the other way around. Or does it? Are our Jack and our Lizzie free, or are they bound ever tighter to their nature and ours? Let us watch and listen, and maybe, while the flickering flame singes our eyelashes, learn.

Here is the food. Jack's steak, the raw juices flowing, overfills the massive pewter plate. He stabs it with the sharp edge of the ornate knife, cuts and twists a large hunk of the animal flesh, tastes, savors, swallows, washing it all down with a large swig of the thick, warm wine. Blood and spirit mix in his throat. His breath comes a little more rapidly. His left leg trembles. His eyes close. Lizzie, whose dainty moist tongue has been caressing the edge of her cream cake, working ever more eagerly toward the sweet center, pauses. Little finger crooked, she picks up her translucent tea cup to drink of the over-sugared warmth. Jack, eyes still closed, rich lips slightly parted, radiates heat. Little tendrils of humid fog begin to wrap themselves around her mind. The teacup drops, shatters, its liquid spilling out free from containment at last. Jack's eyes open. His smile beckons.

Lizzie, feeling slightly faint, hears herself say, "Take me home, Jack." His smile widens, his teeth glisten. She glances quickly around the room with one last fleeting thought of Father.

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"Hurry!" The word seems to explode from her lips. She quickly gathers her belongings and rises.

Jack wipes his mouth on the cloth, drops a few quid on the table, and looks intently into the eyes of his dessert. "Come on then, me tiny sweetmeat. Home it is!"

If you look carefully you can see them walking swiftly through the city streets. Is it London or Fall River or — wait! — is it your very own window they are striding past? Part your curtains if you dare, or merely feel the tremor at the base of your spine. You cannot escape the part of them that is part of you just crouching beneath your oh-so-civilized exterior. Go now. Kiss your wife, tuck in your rosy-cheeked, seemingly innocent children, double lock your doors. And wait. Jack waits. Lizzie waits. The shadowy night of your imperiled soul strokes your cheek with longing. Don't let your breath quicken, don't unlace your corset stays. Hold yourself still. Morning will come. God is in His heaven and all is . . .

They have arrived. The heavy front door swings open unbidden. The old silver moon hides herself behind the clouds and shudders in the darkness. Gaslight turned low, Lizzie enters the parlor. She quietly hangs up her shawl and bonnet. She places the small reticule on the table, lightly presses her finger to her lips and then to the photograph of her father before she turns it over, not noticing the way the glass cracks as she does so. She turns to Jack. His lips lightly, teasingly graze hers and her heart leaps into the forefront of his mind. He feels the beating, pulsing urgency of the blood.

Still demure, still Miss Elizabeth, she asks if he requires any refreshment.

"Oh yes, Miss Elizabeth, I require to drink and sup of you!"

The blush rises from her chest to her cheeks and she sits down on that old familiar sofa, horsehair firm against her back. Still holding on to something cool, something safe, she primly crosses her hands and rests them gently in her lap.

"Well Mr. Jack, tell me a little of your background. Are you a church-going man?"

The sound of his responding laughter chimes loudly, calling her to a far different kind of worship. The patient anticipation has been savored long enough. Their eyes meet in time-honored and all-encompassing recognition. She leans back as he leans forward. His hands, all gentleness gone, roughly push up her skirts. She gasps in fearful delight. The earth turns one degree on its axis. A shooting star falls out of the sky. The last embers of the dying fire in the

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fireplace sputter out, unable to compete with the heat filling the room. Her hoarse voice rasps, "I want to know your real name." He whispers it in her ear. The power of secret knowledge loosens the last bond and her body opens to the moaning delight to come.

Jack's power comes from another, darker place and can no longer be denied or postponed. With one hand on his flies, and the other on the smooth, sure handle of his knife, he is poised for victory. She waits for his entrance. Her body arches, leaps, roars. While her left hand grips her stallion pushing him onward, faster, faster, her right hand reaches for her jewel-encrusted axe, memento of past torment and joy. They strike together as one, ripping, cleaving, sweat, blood, agony, and ecstasy commingling. Never has there been a moment as glorious as this. Fierceness, passion, rage, all simultaneously sated. Oh the blood is salty, the taste is sweet. The triumph of the conquering will spurs them onward, downward, to quaking, smoking places that you could not bear to read about nor I to imagine.

Oh dear reader, I see your questioning eyes. What will become of our Lizzie and our Jack as they flail so mercilessly and gleefully at each other? Will they end as the gingham dog and the calico cat with nothing left? Have you forgotten so soon? They have died long ago, and cannot do so again. They are in what is to them their heaven. Let us give them a few minutes and then peer once more through our keyhole into that staid Victorian parlor.

We are a little early. See, there is Jack buttoning up his flies, and Lizzie rearranging her skirts. All traces of blood and bone and sinew are gone. Prim and properly covered once more, she looks coyly up at him and crinkles her little pug nose. One stray lock of hair caresses her cheek. His eyes light up. His now gentle fingers stroke his moustache and he chuckles. His knife is securely back in his pocket, her axe is tucked back behind the sofa cushion. First dates are always so uncertain, but this one has been a tremendous success.

"Well, Lizzie, me tender-throated songbird, what would you say to next Saturday night?"

"I'd be honored by your presence, Mr. Jack."

She lifts her face to him, and he kisses the tip of her nose.

"Sweet dreams, dearie." Their eyes lock for one darkly intense, pounding moment and then lighten again with laughter.

Jack swirls back out into the night and Lizzie climbs the stairs to her familiar bedroom. "Good night Father, wherever you are," she says silently. "Don't worry about me. I am no longer alone." ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

EXPECTATIONS

by Ruth Rendell

No varnish can hide the grain of the wood, as my cousin Matthew once said of my late husband, adding that no man who was not a true gentleman at heart ever was a true gentleman in manner. George, however, succeeded in passing himself off as wellborn and well-educated, and in recent years it has only been his wife and daughter who knew the real man behind the smile and the black clothes and those snow-white pocket handkerchiefs. Only I and Estella knew the criminality hidden under the melliflu-ous speechmaking and verse-quoting and his handsome looks.

But a gentleman who is upright and admirable is not found stabbed to death on Epsom racecourse as George was three weeks ago. A man as virtuous as some of his acquaintance believed him to be does not leave on his death a contented widow and a joyful daughter. The truth is that, shocked as I was when the news of his murder was brought to me, I was also relieved. These twenty years

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gone by have sometimes been almost intolerable — though what course is there for a woman but to tolerate? — and George's death, horrible though the circumstances of it were, lifted the load from my shoulders in the twinkling of an eye.

His grave is in our village churchyard. Living in London, I missed the countryside and longed to go back. The brewery and all the property, of course, became George's on our marriage. I only deceive myself if I deny that it was to possess them that George married me, but I am glad he kept Satis House, in spite of disliking it so thoroughly. I have returned to it and am about to take my place in county society with my daughter, who comes out in a year's time. By then my mourning will be over and I shall give a ball for her. There will be some hearts broken when the young blades hereabouts set eyes on Estella. Her very name means a star. I always vowed that if I had a girl she should be called Estella, and George, for once, put up no opposition. He, of course, wanted a son.

Although the recent past and its repercussions is a theme in two of Ruth Rendell's most powerful novels, *A Dark Adapted Eye* and *A Fatal Inversion* (written as Barbara Vine), she is not a writer one associates with the historical mystery. In this new short story, she reaches back to a more distant historical past and conjures a figure most readers will recognize.

She is far more beautiful than I ever was. She is tall like her father and has his dark curly hair. It is extraordinary to me now, the effect he had upon me when Arthur brought him home to meet me all those years ago. I fell in love with him that first evening. But even then, blind as I was to everything but George's beauty and George's grace, I retained sense enough to wonder why my half-sibling — I will not dignify Arthur with the name of brother — was so desirous that his friend should like me and I return that particular regard.

Arthur was envious because our father left the greater part of his property to me, his elder child. Perhaps I should have reminded him more often that his riotous and undutiful behaviour almost secured him disinheritance. It was only on his deathbed

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that Papa relented and left him a share in the brewery. But that and the income which came with it was insufficient for Arthur, as I soon understood, though it was not until just before my marriage that I knew of the conspiracy got up between him and George.

Should I have refused George money? Would a prudent young woman have refused? I was so afraid to lose him. Of course I had suitors enough, but I wanted none of them. I wanted George. And the truth of what he said to me was undeniable.

"Why not a thousand pounds now, my dearest, bearing in mind that it will all be mine once we are married? Mine to husband for you and watch over diligently when you are my wife?"

So I agreed. Then, and again and again.

Three weeks before our wedding George was staying in the house and one night, unable to sleep, I came downstairs to find myself a book from the library. They were inside, Arthur and George, sitting over the dying fire with, no doubt, the brandy bottle. The door was a little ajar and I heard their voices.

I had been so certain they would have retired by now that I had come down in my nightgown with only a shawl thrown about me. So I paused at the door, uncertain of what to do next. Then I heard Arthur say,

"She shall have my share of the brewery, my boy, but I'll want a great sum for it, so mind you tell her not to jib at the price."

George laughed. "I'm likely to do that, am I? What, when you and I are dividing the sum between us?"

The man I had been used to call my brother said, "You'll be off then, Compeyson, will you?"

"Don't speak so loud." George's voice was almost too low for me to hear. "The long and the short of it is that I'll only marry her if she won't buy you out. But she will, she will. Why, she's so much in love she'd follow me to the ends of the earth in her petticoat."

It was true. But I trembled as I stood there, drawing the ends of the shawl about me, returning to bed slowly, moving like a sleepwalker. There was no sleep for me that night. I had no one to advise me, though I knew, ignorant as I was, what advice the wise would give. But I loved him. In spite of his treachery, I loved him. I saw the grain through the varnish but still I loved him.

Next day and the next and the next George pleaded with me. When he was my husband, he said, it was only fitting that he should hold the brewery and manage it all. For a while I played the same game as he played. I asked Arthur's price and pretended

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to be appalled at the sum. I counted the days to our wedding day, nineteen days, then eighteen days. My clothes were bought, I had had three fittings for my wedding gown. George said all that would be needful was for me to sign a paper that he would bring me.

Over the first paper I succeeded in spilling ink. Fifteen days, fourteen. I sent to the town for an attorney. He came and looked at the paper, he took it away with him, and the days passed, thirteen, twelve, eleven, but he returned with the paper and pronounced it a legal document. There was no obstacle to my signing it. Except myself. I took my courage in my hands and told George I would be happiest to have *him* buy Arthur out, that I was a mere woman and unfit for business. Once we were married he would have an ample sum with which to purchase Arthur's share.

That was six days before the wedding. George was gone and I saw and heard nothing of him. I had no sleep, I could scarcely rest. But the wedding dress was finished and the bridal cake made, and at last the day of my marriage came. Arthur was to give me away but I had heard nothing of Arthur. George was to be my husband and I had received no sign from him for a week.

It was twenty minutes to nine in the morning and I was seated at my dressing table in front of a gilded looking glass. My maid had dressed me in satin and lace, all white, and put bridal flowers in my hair and Mama's diamonds about my neck. Half-packed trunks stood about the room. I remember the moment when the note came. My veil was on but half arranged and I had but one shoe on, the other being on the table near my hand with trinkets and gloves and a Prayer Book and some flowers, all confusedly heaped about the looking glass.

My maid came in and put the note into my hand. Time and the whole world seemed to stop and I thought, if this letter tells me he is gone, time shall indeed stop and I will remain forever in this moment. I will wear this dress for the rest of my life, with one shoe off and one on, until my hair is white and my skin is yellow. The feast shall remain spread until dust covers it and the bridal cake be a nest for spiders to veil with their webs.

I opened George's letter. "My dearest," he wrote, and he went on to say he loved me, he had been unavoidably absent these past days but he would be awaiting me in the church. I let my maid arrange my veil, I put on my shoe, the rings on my fingers, and then the gloves. I took up the flowers and the Prayer Book and

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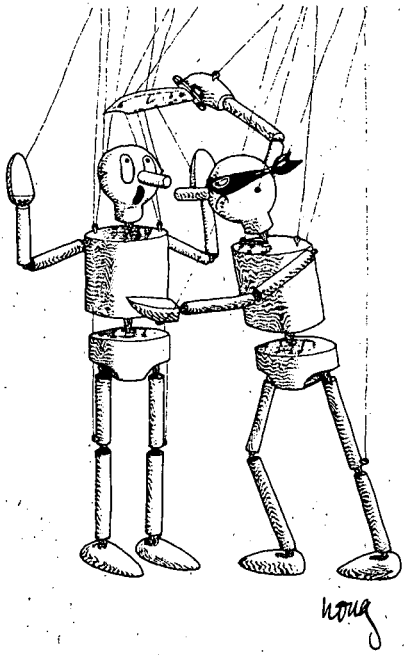
descended the stairs to meet Arthur at the foot and have him take me to be married.

Love was faded within the year. The varnish was stripped away and I saw only the grain, but yet I was married, I was Mrs. George Compeyson, with the dignity of a wife. I had my child to watch grow in health and beauty. Satis House, the name that means a sufficiency, awaited me for my widowhood, and they used to say, when the name was given, that whoever had that house could want nothing else. Enough of my fortune remains after George's depredations for me to live in comfort and give Estella twenty thousand pounds on her marriage.

If I sometimes feel a little low and see myself growing old, my life wasted, I go into that room that was once my bedchamber and sit at the dressing table. There, staring into the looking glass, I tell myself to be thankful for what I did and what I did not do, for a year of love and a lovely child, and that I am not still in that white dress and veil, one shoe off and one shoe on, doomed to be forever Miss Havisham. ●



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An Actor Prepares

by Morris Hershman

A professional writer who has worked in almost every genre, Morris Hershman is a long-time resident of New York City. The several family sagas he wrote for Berkley in the seventies and eighties may have prepared him for the type of mystery story he most often writes today, which deals with interpersonal relationships, acutely and sensitively portrayed.

Of course I was telling the truth. Standing tall on the fresh-painted stage of the Golden Pride Town Hall on the day named in my honor by the current mayor of my hometown, backed by color blowup pictures of myself smiling lustfully at the camera and faced by an admiring audience of former equals now at my feet, any lonely boy's dream of maturity come true, I couldn't have deviated by a hair from my honest recollection.

"One person in this town of Golden Pride became an outstanding friend back when I was growing up." It was close to the end of my thank-you speech. My mother and father had already heard about gratitude in the best pear-shaped tones I could muster, my teachers had been lionized, the local football rivalry mentioned. "I've always been grateful, but I'm not sure to this day how it came about."

I waved triumphantly at the end in response to the loudest applause the Hall had probably ever heard.

Fred Brockleby led the parade of former schoolmates coming up to me, a wife and a child with glasses in tow.

"Did you mean my father when you talked about an outstanding friend?" he asked after hesitantly introducing his immediate family. "I don't know why he felt that way either, but he once told me that the whole town might've made his life a sheer hell if not for you."

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I'll admit I was shaken up. What he said was so out of proportion to anything that had happened between the older man and me. My dad, when he and Mom were seated with me at the table of honor in the fresh-painted dining room later on, asked the same question as Fred.

"Did you mean Ira Brockleby was an outstanding friend of yours? I know he praised you publicly in the paper and when he talked to me and your mother, but the two of you had been outstandingly indifferent to each other for a long time."

I didn't argue. Over a lunch highlighted by the world's best grouper coddled with farm-fresh vegetables, the kind of wholesome, no-frills cooking I could die for in Los Angeles or New York, I realized, thanks to Fred Brockleby's puzzled comment, exactly why Old Ira had bestowed his valuable friendship on me. I'm not sure how I was able to finish that meal without suddenly gagging and then throwing my guts up. . . .

I heard the argument when I was rushing up the corner from Commerce Street on that warm and sunny Fourth of July. The angry words didn't interest me, and I only caught a few of them, shouted phrases, profanity spoken with clipped sharpness from a tautened throat and hurled against clenched teeth.

It was the tone of that stressed speech which interested me. Later on, I intended to find out if I could imitate it with all that bitterness and hatred. Ten years old, and I was already storing up sense memories to help in the dramatic acting I'd do in my adult life.

There was a sudden silence. I remember cocking my head to listen more closely, but now I looked around to locate the actors in this unrehearsed drama. My eyes ranged past the houses set back on the oversized front yards at my left. Every house felt empty. There wouldn't be anybody on the other side of those rolled-down shades. At my right was the drab post office with its flag higher than usual, the gray, one-room library building, the feed store and restaurant, the Golden Pride movie theater with purple-and-yellow lobby cards, and three other business places. Each was shut down this special day in a time when any holiday was the finest ever known, and every July Fourth was glorious.

It sounded as if the man had slammed a door, but the woman with whom he'd been arguing so bitterly made a gurgling sound and became wholly quiet. Not only was there nothing else to hear,

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there wasn't a grown-up man's tone to try and imitate afterwards. I resumed walking swiftly to my destination.

I had to work my way along the crowd at Golden Pride Park celebrating the Fourth by talking cheerily over country music played earnestly by the Five Felton Brothers. White-topped popcorn and rainbow sodas were disappearing, and the hoagies hawked by Mr. Blaufeld would follow in no time. Mayor Simpson was finishing the shortest speech of his career, adding to everybody's rock-bottom contentment.

Two of my older brothers were getting ready to dig into the pile of straw at left of the children's slide. There they'd be rooting around for candy. That was the day's first contest for kids.

To catch their attention, I had to plant my feet apart just as I would do in later years when I played a slum doctor on a short-lived series over the boob tube.

"There's been a big argument between Dot Aldrich and Wendell Upton." I had recognized the voices after all, but it didn't occur to me till then that there might be something more to be concerned about than Wendell's speech inflections when he was mad. "It sounded like—almost like he was going to hurt her."

"What makes you think so?"

I could remember some words and I repeated them, straightening up and making midget fists to help me echo the tone. "Nobody else is gonna marry you except me. Nobody else is gonna *have* you no more!"

"That's a pretty fair imitation."

"But doesn't what he said prove I'm right?"

Elisha was thinking hard. "I happened to hear Ma telling Pop that Wendell isn't a fella that girls really like. When I came closer, to hear more, Pop sent me out to load grain."

"Do you suppose that Wendell would really do Dot some harm?"

"It won't mess up the day even if he does. He's not in the park with her, far as I can guess." Only the young can be so cold-bloodedly cheerful. "Now let's move."

He was still chuckling when he reached the straw pile, to join Zack and the other kids practically diving for the candy.

By the time the watermelon-seed spitting competition got under way, kids had stopped complaining that the candy was turning to hot mush under the July sun. My brother Seth happened to have a gap between his two front teeth that somebody could have driven John Deere himself through, but it didn't help him spit

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watermelon seeds farther than the rest. Vern, my third brother, managed an eight foot two incher, but the contest was handily won by Tom Goldthwait with a distance of eight and a half feet.

Vern, the only sibling with enough brains to keep from holding his fingers straight when he milked a cow, as we used to say, listened to me repeating what I'd heard on Commerce Street. I'd been waiting impatiently for him, and he thought my words over.

"I know that Dot has been upset since she walked out on Wendell at the Oddfellows dance two weeks ago," he said. "If Dot had any family in town and wasn't just working as a waitress, I think they'd have made the last weeks a lot rougher on Wendell."

I shrugged, and he looked alertly at my mobile features.

"Bothered, aren't you? If you want to be sure that Wendell leaves Dot alone, you have to talk to the sheriff."

I had thought of that, too, but I'd given it enough consideration to see why I couldn't do it. "Pop would be put out if he heard that I'd gone to see Sheriff Brockleby on my own."

"Talk to Pop first. Ask him to go instead."

I nodded, walked away, and tried to ignore as much as possible of the holiday's high points in Golden Pride. The bubble-gum blowing contest was under way now, bubbles breaking earlier than expected and shattering across kids' faces. The bubbles were bright pink. The town itself seemed pink as well as red and an eye-hurting sky blue as I moved purposefully away. (A kid sees colors more strongly than a grownup, I think.)

Pop was listening closely to Arlen Goldthwait, my friend Tom's father.

"I sold corn in 'seventy-one for two-forty the bushel," Mr. Goldthwait was saying warmly. His palms were parallel and up, almost as if he was at prayer. An interesting position, I remember thinking. "Corn isn't selling for that much more, now."

Pop transferred his grim look to my direction, changing the subject to a grievance of his own.

"Are you going to look around and gawk at everything, Crane, or are you going to enter even one contest?"

"Can I ask you something first, Pop?" Without waiting for him to agree, I told about Wendell Upton threatening Dot.

"Somebody has to lay down the law to Wendell Upton," Mr. Goldthwait said, having overheard. "I don't see Ira Brockleby anywhere, he's the man to do it."

The sheriff made his entrance at the prize-giving table, jostling

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with Mayor Simpson to stand under the flag when pictures got taken for the *Sentinel.* Pop, taller than Mr. Goldthwait, had tracked his man. "Now he's there, Ira won't leave if there's one more hand to shake, seeing as he's up for reelection."

"Or one more woman he can pat and smooch," Mr. Goldthwait added moodily, delaying Pop if only for a moment. "Even an election doesn't stop Ira trying to make Fran Brockleby sorry she ever met him, let alone married him."

On his way to see the newly arrived sheriff and talk to him, Pop was held up by Mom and then by Lila Osborne, who was in her eighties. I couldn't blame Pop for respecting an older person, but courtesy caused him to delay.

Pop was still busy when the paper-plate-throwing contest got under way. I decided to get the sheriff's attention and talk for myself, but it surely wasn't easy.

"Next time I see Wendell Upton, boy," the sheriff said after what was becoming my set speech, "I'll warn him 'gainst disturbing the peace and arguing with Dottie."

Nobody else ever called her Dottie, I was thinking as Brockleby shook one more sun-roughened hand, then flirted ponderously with some female and bussed a foul-tempered baby. Get reelected or bust, that was his real slogan.

Stranded, I watched the costume parade being organized now that the horseshoe-throwing contest was over. I had accomplished as much as possible. When Pop talked to Brockleby, his words would reinforce what I had just been telling the sheriff.

Only a child would have made the decision I did now, and a child who didn't know yet that he wanted a career in acting. A young actor-to-be — this must have been my real thinking, on a level below consciousness — could get a chance to study the effects of gratitude on a human face, a human body. He would be able to duplicate it in case of need at some time in the course of what might shape up to be a long and satisfying career. All that the child had to do in order to gain this incalculable advantage was to visit Dot Aldrich and tell her what had just happened. Nothing easier.

Dot lived in a small apartment above the restaurant where she worked. Mr. Blaufeld's restaurant was shut tight on account of the celebration. I called up to Dot's apartment, but there was no answer. The downstairs buzzer drew no response, either. By the time I was running up the creaky wooden stairs in back of the

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building, I felt sure she had gone out to take part in the irresistible fun at the park. There was a pop song about forgetting all your cares if you went downtown, and I was the right age to believe that the lyrics of every song must be true or they wouldn't have been written.

It turned out that Dot was home, but for the last time. Through the half-opened door I could see a patch of dust-streaked floor and her body on it. She had been stabbed again and again. A black-handled knife like Wendell Upton's had finally been planted in her heart, stilling it.

I think I spent most of a minute staring at the first dead body I ever saw, noticing the feet spread, the hands wide apart and open, the lips far apart. Then I shook my head as if to clear it and ran down to tell the sheriff what wickedness had been done here.

I hardly realized I was out of that building till I felt the sun warming the top of my head. It was easy enough to run into Golden Pride Park, but something else entirely to reach the prize-giving table again. The crowd was larger than before and its members wouldn't be moved. I jumped up half a dozen times before making sure that the sheriff was there. Brockleby, smiling sunnily, was handing out a ribbon for the mayor to award to a winner and smiling at every woman, young or old. In line with Mr. Goldthwait's recent moody prophecy, the sheriff wasn't giving all his attention to the prospect of being reelected. He was combining business with pleasure.

I pushed against the crowd. My mother, looking scandalized, took this time to hurry over. "Crane Iversen, I taught you to say 'Excuse me' and not push against people if you want to pass them. Crane! Apologize to Reverend Flornoy and come back this very minute."

Mom assumed that I'd do what I was told, usually a pretty good bet. She turned away and got into conversation with Phoebe Mifflin while I went back to pushing.

A quick check at who was near the table and I stopped. As if he purposely wanted to keep me away, Sheriff Brockleby moved back from the far side of the table and out of my sight. I tried to call him. In that crowd, no one heard or interpreted the hysteria in a child's shout.

Looking around, I was hardly able to keep from noticing the costume paraders. Doris Cail was dressed as the Statue of Liberty with a torch that looked like an oversized ice-cream cone. Sandy

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Collins had put on a pair of six-guns and a hat that kept falling over his forehead. Even as I turned away, swearing at myself for having wasted a minute, I found myself thinking that next year, if I wasn't considered too old, I would dress up and be the best on parade. I wondered what could have kept me from doing it before.

Which was when my attention was distracted again, but by something more important this time.

A particular physical object wasn't in sight as it should have been. There was an empty space at the rounded curb between the northern end of Commerce Street and the park. Coming back just minutes ago, I had noticed Wendell Upton's black-and-white BMW 635, the classiest car in town. (Pop, looking at it, had told his sons, "Wendell thinks it's going to help him catch Dot Aldrich or some other girl, but Wendell has no idea how to catch a girl. Poor damn fool!") Between that time and this, Wendell had taken his car out of there.

He could put plenty of distance between himself and the town. Maybe he'd never be brought back to trial for what he had done. He'd have gotten away with murder.

And at this split second of time, the sheriff didn't even know—

The sheriff!

There he was, the long arm of the law himself. Brockleby had returned to his place back of the shiny prize-giving table.

The crowd between us had become much larger. Town Council members and others were cheering the paraders. Brockleby was deep in conversation with Mr. Garband, who owned the movie theater and joined Pop and Mr. Blaufeld for occasional Thursday night poker at the sheriff's place. Trying to reach him physically would be a waste of time, as I had proved. And even if I did, he wouldn't be able to make sense out of a word I might say on account of all the noise.

Occasionally he did look away from Mr. Garband. Shoals of parents were a breath away, so the sheriff had to look out often at the parade of kids. No better way to convince voters to give him one more chance at the public trough.

But the parade could help me, too. I knew I could imitate people well enough so that the subjects were sure to be identified. Sarabeth Wilkins actually sniffed one time that if I worked as hard at school as I did with my mimicry I might amount to something in life. Here was a chance to prove myself in the town's eyes, to catch the sheriff's attention with my urgent message.

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This much I'll say: If there was an alternative, I didn't see it.

Sarabeth Wilkins happened to be in the parade. She didn't like it when I imitated people we knew, but she herself wasn't above dressing up in black and carrying a broomstick to make believe she was a witch. I approached her right away, causing her to stop in annoyance. Feigning a heavy stance, like Wendell Upton, with my right hand I made a partial fist, as if holding the hilt of a knife. Then I moved it up and down in front of my mouth as if I were picking my teeth with the blade. The whole town had seen the graceless Wendell Upton do just that.

"You look like Wendell Upton to the life," Vern, my smart brother, called out right away.

Then Mrs. Julia Kilrail called out indignantly, "Crane Iversen is losing the contest prize for Sarabeth!"

I glanced away from Sarabeth, who was raising her broom to chase me off, to see if the sheriff was alert to my actions. He was, all right, but he only smiled, pointing me out to a parent as if to say that my monkey trick was dandy, just what somebody might expect from a bright and fun-loving Golden Pride kid.

I had missed my chance. Close, but no cigar, as we used to say.

Unless . . .

"What is that fool boy doing now?" Mrs. Kilrail demanded of the whole town. "He scares me."

I had raised my fist menacingly while speaking in the sharp tones of the furious Wendell, repeating words I hadn't known I remembered. "'He's a married man who only wants you for his dirty fun. If you won't marry *me,* you won't never forget me neither!'"

I lowered my fist till it was closer to Sarabeth, slowly the first time, rapidly after that. Everybody, especially our idiot sheriff, must have realized that now I was imitating Wendell angry beyond reason and that Wendell was stabbing, stabbing, stabbing.

One of Ira Brockleby's beefy paws surrounded my right shoulder, and his beer breath was almost as close to me as his scowl. "Say your piece, boy, and if you got no reason for what you just did, I'm going to whale you right here myself. Speak up quiet and quick."

I made only one addition when I repeated the story in Brockleby's sunny office next morning, wondering if Wendell Upton had slammed a door before doing what he did. The sheriff made a point of ignoring my speculation, but he had become thoughtful.

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"You certainly hear things, and I know you watch everybody," Brockleby said in a cautious voice that didn't carry much farther than my shirt buttons. He'd eased Pop out the door after I signed a typed statement, which left me and him talking together. "Is there anything else you know about Dottie? Did you ever see her with somebody you wouldn't expect? Were you ever surprised to see somebody going into the building where she lived or leaving it? No? I wish I could be sure and maybe I'd — all right, never mind. Never mind."

Not till the next day did I find out that he had done something very nice for my sake. In an interview with the Golden Pride *Sentinel,* after modestly agreeing that he had chased the undoubted killer to U.S. 6, where Wendell Upton died in the flaming wreckage of his BMW, he went out of his way to give me credit for alerting him to what had happened. He told how I had used pantomime and added that there was "a damn good actor growing up in our town."

I thought a lot about becoming an actor. When I finally announced the decision after having graduated college, my number one rooter swore I couldn't miss. I think he finally persuaded my folks to agree. . . .

But the sheriff's actual role in my development didn't become clear until Fred Brockleby repeated his late father's remark about my having kept Ira's life from being "a sheer hell." Then I understood. By those cunningly bestowed praises he had put me into the position of being unable to say anything I might know or guess against him. A nosy kid like me might have known that he, the old lecher himself, had been making it with Dot Aldrich.

And then? Why, after her loyal Wendell became furiously jealous and slammed the door on her that July Fourth day, the sheriff emerged from his hiding place in Dot's apartment. Of course he had stopped in on his way to the town celebration for some pleasure of his own. Instead, Dot talked quiet and quick about marriage or exposure. Brockleby saved his reputation with an ordinary black-handled knife like poor Wendell's. . . .

Acting well was what Ira himself had done afterwards, acting enthusiastic about embryo abilities that might keep me out of town and make him feel safer. In my seat at the hometown testimonial, admired and envied by all eyes, it crossed my mind a little ruefully that, as between Ira Brockleby's impersonation and my own, maybe the wrong one of us had turned professional. ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

The Restless Gravestone

by Kandis Elliot

A headstone carver's wagon creaked with solemn gravity through the caked mud street of Dodgeton, Wisconsin. With a tight rein on his team of sorrels, the driver skirted deep wheel-ruts and other pitfalls; hats came off and bonnets bowed as the laden vehicle passed. Its headstone — actually a mighty monument, a full seven feet tall when upright—was a sight few eyes had beheld in any cemetery, much less one accommodating the dearly departed of a rail-siding town whose population now burgeoned at one hundred six. Heads nodded in appreciation for the glinting gray marble festooned with polished lilies, crosses, cherubim, and, in a central oval, a bas-relief horse. Eyes squinted with tension as

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the wagon sagged and groaned under its unaccustomed load, which would, it seemed, complete the journey to Heavenly Hope Hill only with the grace of God.

Appreciation was offered for the team as well. Every onlooker held that the condition and quality of a man's horse bespoke a man's character, and these particular horses were as prodigious a sight to behold as the great headstone itself. Long-boned, big-muscled horses; when the spring sun hit just right, their sorrel coats gleamed with the gold of a burnished double-eagle coin. Black speckles ran from the roots of their tails and over their backs, dotting their flanks and withers like a rampage of mice. "I see ol' Jack borrowed hisself a brace a Dodge's mares," came the oft-repeated soft comment from shopkeeper, barber, farmers-come-to-town, and other observers as the wagon rolled resolutely by. "Right fitting" and "The Judge wouldn't a had it otherwise" were the knowing replies.

Only one set of eyes was neither admiring nor respectful. Scummed with age and overhung with wiry gray brows, they peered from the shadow of an undoffed hat. Hands with knuckles like walnuts hiked up dusty, threadbare trousers held closed by one remaining front button. "Them's *my* horses," the old man mumbled, the way elderly folks do when their thoughts are as incontinent as their bladders. He puckered corrugated lips and squirted out a stream of tobacco juice, barely missing his own cracked boots. "They's *all* my horses." He shuffled to the edge of the wooden plank walk and leaned on the Antlers Saloon hitching post.

A gentle hand alighted on the old gent's shoulder. "Now, don't go

Wisconsin native Kandis Elliot currently makes her living as a science illustrator for the University of Wisconsin. She is also production manager for *Tomorrow* magazine, a position in which she's learned the ropes of publishing from a professional, as well as a writer's, standpoint. Ms. Elliot's first story for *EQMM* continues a series that appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1994, featuring university zoologist Charles Farnsworth.

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getting yourself all het-up again, Nathan," a younger man soothed in a practiced manner. He wore an apron over his pinstriped duck-cloth shirt, his sleeves puffed around bicep garters. "Judge Dodge is dead 'n gone, and it's time you make yer peace with him. The man was a treasure."

"Jedidiah Dodge was a cussed, double-dealing thief," the oldster said with another spit at a pile of horse apples, missing them, too.

"Come on back in and finish your beer, Nathan, and stop fretting."

"That cuss shoulda been hung thirty-some year ago." But the wagon was turning down the fork toward Holy Mother of Consolation Church and the hill where the graveyard stood next to an Indian effigy mound of a swallow in flight, so the old man allowed himself to be led back into the dark interstices of the Antlers. At his customary table he mumbled on; "I trusted 'im . . . I trusted 'im" was heard over and over, while patrons stopped by to wash down prairie dust and discuss the grand event of the erecting of the headstone. More glances than usual turned to the old mumbler. His clay stein of draft beer, brewed locally and well by Norwegian immigrants, was refilled more than once by sympathetic listeners at the bar, anxious to hear the old tale yet again.

Nathan Smith didn't find it hard to remember. He'd lived it in his mind for too long. Thirty years too long. He'd been a young man back then, and the horse had been his.

She stood a good twenty hands, a ton-horse, but her lithe confirmation belied it. Not palomino, not buckskin, her glossy pelt was a burnished double eagle gleaming in the summer sun. Her back and flanks were as dotted as an African speckle-cat's. She tossed a long black mane and tail; a white stripe reached down to her black nose; her narrow-set eyes were gray-blue, China eyes, they called 'em. She moved with a spirit and an energy telling all onlookers that she knew she was the most astonishing piece of horseflesh to put hoof to Wisconsin soil, as any fool could see with a single look.

Young Jedidiah Dodge, educated lawyer son of monied landholders, certainly saw all that with a single look. Somewhere along the line he learned of Nathan's folks back Tennessee way, how they'd brought Injun horses from the Territories and bred 'em to other fine bloodlines, Morgan and Walker and big, punched-up horses, developing an eye-catching animal that could carry a gentleman or haul his lady's carriage or plow his prairie. Nathan's mare—pay for an indentured youth, some said, or an inheritance,

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or gift, or (some said) stolen—no matter how he came to be riding her into Riverton (as Dodgeton had been called then) one spring day, was one of the most incomparable horses ever melded from the breeds of two continents.

And, most importantly, at three years old she was ready to be bred to Wisconsin's finest stallions, to establish Nathan Smith's dream of a broodmare ranch renowned throughout the state.

Jedidiah Dodge thought a gosh-awful lot of Nathan's horse—and of Nathan's dream.

People speculated that Nathan just didn't have the head for Dodge's contracts dealing with ranch facilities and loans for a horse-breeding operation. A few others knew of a certain card game, Dodge drawing a ten of hearts to fill a Jack-high straight flush and making Nathan a sure loser. In any case, by the time the golden mare dropped her first foal, she was property of Jedidiah Dodge, and Nathan Smith was just another ranch hand. Every two years the horse was put to a different stallion, and the colts and fillies, all strong and big and full of hybrid vigor, were again bred to select mares and stallions, until after three-quarters of a man's lifetime the look of the golden mare was stamped on hundreds of beautiful, utilitarian, and sought-after Dodge Sorrels.

Old Judge Jedidiah Dodge was buried a very wealthy corpse.

Whenever old Nathan Smith thought of the mare, his eyes welled with tears.

Patrons in the Antlers would later speculate on what motive pulled Nathan to the graveyard that evening. At the time, they were well into their own cups. Few paid heed as he tottered unsteadily, still mumbling, into the darkness, his grizzled, leathery face emblazoned with wrath.

Jamming his hat down against the rising breeze, he weaved along Dodgeton's rutted road, took the fork to Holy Mother of Consolation, and climbed the hill to the cemetery. He passed under the wooden arch upon which an artistic parishioner had crafted "Heavenly Hope" with neat staves. Starlight and wind-battered fireflies brightened the random-seeming placement of wooden crosses and stone markers. There were some fifty graves, accumulated over decades. The long afterglow of a June evening afforded enough light so that even Nathan's ageing eyesight had no problem making out the new marker sprouting among the trunks of bur oaks.

Sobered a little after his walk, Nathan closed on the seven-foot

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monument. His boots sank into the soft mound of Dodge's two-month-old grave as he peered at the barely discernible carvings on the headstone's face. He ran his old crippled fingers over them, then dug in his pocket for a match. He struck it on the side of the stone and, cupping it against the gusty breeze, held it to the inscription:

Jedidiah Micah Abraham Dodge
September 10, 1832—March 31, 1896
Here Lies A Treasure
Honored Judge ℞ Beloved Benefactor
R. I. P.

After sounding out the words, Nathan Smith gathered as much juice as he could from his well-worked tobacco wad and ejected a very respectable deposit on the mound of the grave. "Treasure! Damned horse thief, and the Lord knows it." Replacing his burned-down match with a fresh one, he then inspected the intricate carvings. The carver had used templates to make the angels, lilies, and so on, but he'd had a daguerreotype of the living model for the bas-relief horse. The sculpture presented every detail as accurately as Dodge's imported-from-Boston equestrian artist had promised, such perfection being the reason why Dodge himself had to abide two months in a grave marked only by a mean wooden cross. From her China eyes to the multitude of tiny dots on her flanks, the golden mare stood, immortalized in marble above the head of the man she had made into the Beloved Benefactor of Dodge County, Wisconsin.

The match burned out unheeded at Nathan's calloused fingertips. Night enveloped the carving on the monument until his eyes adjusted; starlight filtering through young oak leaves reformed the graceful outline of the horse in the stone. "My mare," Nathan sobbed. The image swam in a flood of tears.

"You low-down, cussed horse thief," Nathan whispered to the grave.

"You card-cheatin' fancy paper-writer," he said, louder.

"Fry in *hellfire,*" he bawled at the top of his lungs, bringing knotted fists pounding down on the slick marble. He embraced the tall monument as if there were life he might strangle from the stone. The wind seemed to weep with him as it swept through the oak leaves above; its occasional gusts howled in harmony with his raving, which broke now and again into intelligible oration.

"I shoulda horsewhipped you into this grave thirty-some year

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ago. Draw to a inside straight flush? It ain't done. I trusted you, same's the gelt trusts the hog farmer. Slopped 'n stabled — hog trusts right up till he's brained, butchered, boiled, an' et—"

The monument, ever so slightly, rocked. Nathan wasn't sure he felt it. His eyes opened and his mouth hushed. Was the wind prodding *him* askew, rather than the stone? He straightened, studied the dark monolith, then put his hands on its face and gave a mighty shove.

It rocked. Just a hair. "They ain't put it in right," Nathan muttered. "They put it in cockeyed." He pushed again, felt the slight give, then as it came back to rest he pushed harder, and it gave even more. "Why, I'm gonna rock this thievin' cardsharp's headstone all the way down this here hill," Nathan said, a note of glee rising within the angry promise. And he kept pushing, and the monument rocked at an ever-increasing arc from upright, and even the wind supplied a hearty gust as though to aid in the desecration. Nathan, puffing now, steeled himself for the final shove that would send it backwards on a one-way trip. Just as it seemed the monument had to topple—"Roll over in that box, Jedidiah—" it hung fire on the rim of its far arc, hesitated—"Ain't nobody kin draw to a inside straight flush—" returned once more, passed the point of righting itself—"Steal the one thing in my life meant more'n spit—" the howling wind pressing on its back—"How you like them apples, you cussed horse thi-*yiiiiiii*—" and tipped forward and down, driving Nathan Smith into the soft mound of the grave. There the minister would find him next morning, with the image of the golden mare crushed into his forehead.

It wasn't his business that a bunch of gravestones had been knocked down by perpetrators unknown; but the graveyard, last remnant of a vanished town, had long been swallowed up by the Dodge County Wildlife Preserve, and any monkey business there *was* his business. Unfortunately.

Because Charles D. Farnsworth did not visit graveyards. As a zoologist he willingly investigated spider-dripping caves, malarial jungles, Ebola-infected Zaire villages, and swamps overrun with alligators who fancied themselves Jurassic allosaurs. He'd once been called to discourage the civilized squirrels of Mother England from nesting in the "dreaming spires" of his Alma Mater, Oxford. He'd also wrestled with a barbaric snapping turtle intent on laying eggs on the stadium's fifty-yard-line at his adopted University

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of Wisconsin, in whose untamed colonial wilds he'd served as professor of zoology for over a decade. Farnsworth's reputation as a fearless, and sometimes feared, wildlife preservationist nowadays flew far before him. Not a soul, however, suspected his loathing for graveyards. When a local warden reported possible Indian-artifact damage associated with a slew of overturned headstones in the relic cemetery, his two passions were in sore conflict.

With a sigh and a shrug, Charles Farnsworth directed himself into the zoology department's research vehicle, a dented, faded-blue Suburban, veteran of many a student field trip, and headed for the Wisconsin countryside.

Three members of the Heavenly Hope Cemetery Committee awaited him at the end of a two-rut road through grasslands and patches of oak and hickory woods. Farnsworth shook hands with white-haired Chas Sadoski, younger Alley Borchert, and Miss Pamela Wallashek, who was also the area game warden.

"First time I've been asked to take on bogeymen," Farnsworth acknowledged, "but I'll give it a go."

"Didn't think university professors went on wild *ghost* chases," said Borchert defiantly. The two gentlemen narrowed their eyes at the so-called professor, whose six-three frame towered head and shoulders over both. Or perhaps they mistrusted his perfect elocution of the language Americans also mouthed. Farnsworth merely shrugged. Most natives reckoned academicians to be dotty old sacks, gone to seed and soft in the head; the opposite of himself, of course, in every respect.

Pamela, on the other hand, greeted Farnsworth with an intrigued smile and lustful approval. She wore a tan uniform with officious tree, duck, and leaf-embroidered sleeve patches. Her sweet country face and porcine figure marked her as a typical bratwurst-, beer-, and butter-loving Wisconsin lass.

"Committee mows grass, trims storm-broke limbs, that sort of thing," explained retired farmer and octogenarian Chas Sadoski. "Come Memorial Day we put out plastic flowers and flags. Only get here once a month or so, so we can't say what day exactly it all happened."

"Let's get on with it, then, shall we?" Farnsworth said, more gruff than usual. Already the aura of *graveyard* was invading interstices of his heart that he thought he'd well protected.

"The Indian mound's over there, Professor." Warden Pamela immediately took over guide duty.

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He was led past three dozen or so unevenly placed stones and markers, most the typical tombstone shape, some flat slabs, a few tall, more ornate monuments. Nothing as elaborate as those he remembered from the last cemetery he'd been in, which was, he'd vowed, the last one he was *ever* going to be in while he still breathed. He stopped his brain from counting the years, months, and days he'd managed to keep that vow.

On this June morning, at least a third of Heavenly Hope's stones were found tipped over or set askew, the long grass around them flattened and torn. Several of the graves had been dug into. On passing inspection, the damage appeared already days old.

They walked to the southern crest of the hill, where on the highest point Farnsworth discerned the outline of the Indian mound he'd come to check. Ten-meter tapering crescents extended gracefully away from the round head, aimed down at a prairie river a quarter-mile distant. "Intriguing," he said. "The flying swallow motif. Somewhat rare."

"You know about these things, Professor?" asked Pamela.

"The mound builders remain rather mysterious. Disappeared quite early in Native American history. No one is quite sure what the mounds were for, either."

"Not graves?"

"Many times they were indeed graves. Sometimes they held just pottery, gold, and copper artifacts, that sort of thing, with no human remains. Other times nothing was buried in them."

"Maybe graverobbers got to them, too," Alley Borchert said.

Heavenly Hope's Christian occupants had evidently respected the mound, for no stone marker came within twenty strides of it. In an eroded patch of earth below one wing, Pamela pointed out new, shallow excavations. Scattered soil held faint impressions resembling moccasin tracks.

"Cemeteries get fool pranksters who tip over gravestones, usually kids on Halloween," said Chas, wheezing a little from the walk. "But the committee figgered this for the work of graverobbers 'cause a the diggings."

"And more than one person done it," added the younger man. "Them big monuments weigh nearly a ton."

"We're thirty miles from any town," Farnsworth considered. "And isn't that sort of activity a bit beyond the abilities of modern youth? Spend all their time on computer games. Too out of shape for this nonsense."

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"Sad but true, Professor," agreed Chas. "Every now and again it happens, though. Even way out here."

Farnsworth skirted the tracks, then found others in digs farther downslope. "I believe I've unmasked your culprit. It's a bear."

Three voices harmonized melodically. "A *bear?*"

"Ursus americanus. Common black bear. Three of them, actually." He pointed out individual pug marks. "Here's the adult, and quite a handsome specimen, from the size of these tracks. I should say a good thirty stone—four hundred pounds, that is. Big for a sow, but here are her cubs, one slightly larger than the other, and given the time of year, I'd put the pair at five months old. Half-barrel size."

"That's crazy," Borchert sputtered. "Ain't been a bear in Dodge County since the turn of the century."

"Don't see why a bear'd wanna toss around tombstones," added old Chas.

Warden Pamela examined the new tracks and nodded. "We've had reports of bears wandering more and more south. Even some confirmed cougar sightings. Guess Dodge County's a big, empty place for animals to reintroduce themselves on the sly."

Farnsworth agreed. The preserve occupied well over three-fourths of the county, and was now considered, sadly enough, one of the largest blocks of uninhabited wild land east of the Mississippi. "Well, the tracks are a week old. Let's have a closer look at the damage, shall we?" The male entourage followed at his heels, Pamela at his elbow.

The toppled markers, some more than a century old and the youngest dated 1917, lay scattered senselessly off their bases. Three graves were further desecrated by ragged shallow holes, which were more torn than dug, either into the sunken grave itself or under the adjacent headstone. Several other grave sites were scarred by long gouges that Farnsworth recognized as fitting the prodigious claws of a big black bear.

"Well, I dare say your committee needn't worry about further incidents of this nature. I believe our culprit was only being a good bear. Ah, here we are." He knelt to examine papery shards scattered around one of the deep holes. "Remains of the underground nest of the German picnic bee, as the species has been dubbed. A *Vespa,* I believe."

Chas blinked myopically at the gray wads. "A *bee?*"

"First bears, now bees," Alley Borchert groused.

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"Hornet, actually. An import from Europe. Came over several decades ago to New York, and has been following fast-food-chain dumpsters across the continent ever since. They're ground nesters. Don't produce honey, but a bear with cubs would be interested in the larvae." He dug a little deeper into the erstwhile nest, which the insects had established directly under the stone of "MayBelle Annie Gunderson, Aged 14 Months, Died in the Year of No Summer, 1885."

A few curled, smashed yellow bodies clung steadfastly to wads of gray paper. "Quite a large nest, for the species. Probably what attracted the bears."

Chas shook his snowy head. "Bear gotta be crazy, dig up a hornets' nest. What in thunder for?"

"A tasty treat, I should imagine. Bears would be quite immune to stings. Thick pelt."

"Except for their noses," game warden Pamela added. "They get stung all over their noses. Makes 'em real touchy for days. —My brother Benny works up 't Manitowish Waters," she explained. "They get bear problems all the time with summer campers."

Farnsworth stood up and patted nonexistent detritus from his tweed slacks. He dearly wanted to return to his pleasant office with its multitude of specimens from all over the world — for a moment his mind dwelt on familiar images of monitor lizards, tarsiers, coelacanths, beetle collections, all manner of stuffed, mounted, pickled, skeletonized, plasticized, and otherwise-prepared creatures awaiting admiration and educational airings in biology classes. And then the pleasant thought was replaced with one rather devastating: His own office was in a sense a depository for the dead. With a shudder that fed the tension growing in his belly, he made himself inspect each stone that had been disturbed.

"The bears appear to have actively tipped over the stones with hornets beneath them." Farnsworth pointed out three such to his companions. "The others, I suspect, were just dislodged by the animals inadvertently knocking against them. These headstones would easily tip or rock aside, for the graves are all sunken to some degree, creating uneven ground. Remember, crypts were not mandated at the time, and the wooden coffins have now rotted away."

"That must be how they knocked over these two big monuments," Pamela noted. "I'm surprised even a bear could do it."

One of the monuments, now cracked in two, had harbored the

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biggest nest. "The old sow put quite an effort into it," Farnsworth said. "She's lucky she didn't smash it on one of her cubs. Fortune favors dumb animals." He inspected the other tipped monument, this one intact. He found himself wondering about the excellent carvings, still in fine condition, on the upturned face of the stone. "I say, this fellow Dodge spared no expense for this marker, given his era. That is a splendid equestrian relief. Rather odd to see it on a cemetery monument."

Chas bent over the inscription. "Old Jedidiah had quite a reputation in his day as a horse breeder, they say. Alley here's one of his great-great-grandsons or nephews or whatever—what are you to him again, Alley?"

"Just shirttail," the younger man replied. "My full name's Albert Dodge Borchert."

"Alley's the one who thought it was graverobbers," added Pamela. "Seems Jedidiah Dodge's grave used to get dug up regular, back before this graveyard got forgotten way out here in the preserve."

"Oh?"

She pointed to the inscription. "'Here lies a treasure.' Guess people took that seriously. I sure wouldn't have it on *my* headstone. Just asking to be dug up. Some joker *still* tips the stone over at least once a year."

A little finger of intrigue wormed through Farnsworth's desire to vacate the premises. Why would anyone make a habit of tipping over one monument in a very isolated graveyard? But enough. "Gentlemen, and Miss Wallashek, I believe you needn't concern yourselves further. I seriously doubt this bear's even in the vicinity any longer—she would know when she's cleaned out relatively small pickings. But I shall have some students set up a honey trap. That will take care of the matter."

"Honey trap?"

"A pepper-spray bomb, baited with honey. Harmless but nasty experience. I assure you, should she return and get a face full, Mother Bear *and* her cubs will doubtless flee the entire county."

And that, Farnsworth decided, finishes that.

The following Monday, Charles D. Farnsworth was enjoying a cup of tea in his office and reading about the bear damage to Heavenly Hope Cemetery—the article was hot off a local press, sent courtesy of warden Pamela—when he received a phone call telling

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him about a second round of vandalism in the graveyard.

He sat bolt upright, dumping the tea over his expansive oak desk and inundating a low flat of Venus's-flytrap seedlings. "The devil you say!"

"Guess you were wrong about that bear, Professor," Chas Sadoski said gleefully. "She come back an' tipped over a bunch more headstones—them bears had themselves just a fine old time—and dug up some more bee nests. You think it'd help, I get the committee to come up and spray the bejeesis outta that whole hill? Dozen cans a Raid oughta do 'er."

Zoology's rusted Suburban was put to task on Farnsworth's second trip to Heavenly Hope. The committee was there to meet him, Chas and Alley emblazoned with the contemptuously smug looks only the great unwashed can manifest when confronting shamelessly conspicuous errors on the part of their intellectual betters. Warden Pamela's chubby face projected embarrassing disappointment.

"All right, then," Farnsworth commanded, delving into his considerable wealth of ten-penny words, "let's have a look at this obstreperous bear."

Five small gravestones and the horse-engraved Dodge monument were tipped or displaced this time. Each was given studious scrutiny, the silent committee intent not on the stones but on Farnsworth's every move and "hmmm." Chas Sadoski kindly pointed out the untouched honey trap, almost setting off the pressure-sensitive trigger before Farnsworth grabbed his hand. Like two fat sticks of dynamite, the fruit jar of honey taped to a pepper-gas canister sat in the grass one grave over from Dodge's. It had attracted only a multitude of gummed-up insects.

Farnsworth frowned for a long time on the toppled monument, then turned his attention to the deep hole in the head of the grave.

"Must've been the mother of all bee nests, eh, Professor," snickered Alley Borchert.

"I will offer that this is quite a determined bear," Farnsworth conceded, looking at the mounds of soil tossed around the hole. No hornet-nest remains were in evidence. He picked up splinters of rotten wood. "It appears she's gotten all the way down to Jedidiah Dodge. Who appears to have been buried much more recently than a century ago."

"Oh, he probably was," said old Chas. "He got reburied in a new

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pine box every time some fool treasure-hunter whacked into him. That's probably from the latest box. Maybe fifty year ago or so."

Farnsworth granted that the rotted wood chips could have lasted fifty years, buried deeply in a dry hill.

Game Warden Pamela kicked at a pile of earth. "There's not many people around these days who've even heard that treasure story, Professor. Nobody believes it anymore. Or if they do, they figger someone got the treasure right after Jedidiah got planted. Story goes that they found a dead man on his grave not two months after."

"Nathan Smith," Alley said. "I remember the name. Jedidiah's partner in the horse business. Somethin' about Nathan and Jedidiah had a falling out over a wealthy widow woman."

"Yep, yep," added Chas. "Dodge won her over, and when the lady died young, he was so tore up that he kept all her jewels an' a fistful of double eagles."

"Double eagles?"

"Them are twenty-dollar gold pieces, Professor. Anyway, he took 'em to the grave when *he* went, years later. In the pillow, right under his head. My gran'pa heard tell — bartender in them days. Ol' Nathan never forgive Jedidiah for winning the woman he loved. Everyone figgered him and a secret partner come up to Dodge's grave right here, dug up the treasure, and when the partner saw how much it was, he bashed in Nathan's brains and made off with the treasure hisself." He waggled a hand about. "In the old days folks could still find a spilled coin here and there."

Pamela said, "Before all this bear business, the story was it's the ghost of Nathan Smith who done all the headstone tipping."

"On windy nights when the moo-o-oon is dark," added Dodge's shirttail relative.

Pamela slapped his arm. "Oh, Alley, you're giving me goosebumps."

Farnsworth was developing more than gooseflesh from standing not only in a cemetery but over an opened grave. "Something about only *Dodge's* stone being tipped on a regular basis, I recall?"

Chas nodded. "That's right. Not often. Couple times a year. You can depend on it, though. Never once seen who done it."

With a bemused glance Farnsworth noted the clandestine looks flicking amongst the committee members. Death or decrepitude was going to reveal *that* prankster, he suspected. But now he had both a mystery and an embarrassment to clear up, and then a

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graveyard to vacate. "You said there were several graves dug up? I see only this one."

Fingers pointed to the southern slope of the hill. "They got into the Indian mound, too. Guess you'd call that a grave."

Scattered earth circled a wide hole in the "chest" part of the flying swallow. Farnsworth knelt beside the excavation and slowly sifted through the upturned sod and soil. Unlike the other acts, somehow this violation struck him with a bit of sorrow, as though a special spirit had lingered here, far from Christian paradise, keeping a protective watch over the river valley and restored prairie lands below.

He held up a red sliver of fired clay. "Looks like the bears collected their German picnic bees in Native American pottery. Quite tidy, wouldn't you say?"

Alley Borchert snorted and folded his arms. "What are you going to do about the bear, Professor?"

He stood up and considered the waiting committee members. "Miss Wallashek, gentlemen—you are quite correct that this bear will take some special handling. Since my poor honey trap seems to have been totally ineffective, I'm afraid I'm going to have to resort to more conventional methods."

"Drug darts?" suggested Pamela.

"Shooting?" said Chas, hopefully. "I got a helluva eight-gauge."

Farnsworth wondered what the old farmer used to do with *that*. "The zoology department," he said carefully, "possesses seventy-pound, steel Kenyan lion traps. They'll do quite well for black bears. But understand—when they're set up, it will be dangerous for anyone to come mucking about here. Lion trap can take a man's leg off at the shin bone, you know."

The committee members' jaws all dropped.

"After you spread the word, the traps should reap a double benefit by convincing *two*-legged graverobbers to do their hunting elsewhere."

Alley Borchert narrowed an eye. "Why are you thinking two-legged vandals now? You were real convinced about bears."

"I was quite correct about the bears. However, you've published this incident in the paper, thereby bringing it to the attention of any possible graveyard entrepreneurs. If there *are* lost double eagles scattered about your Judge Dodge's grave, an easily rented electronic metal detector would certainly pinpoint them. And who knows what might be in the Indian mound? The bear dug up a few

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pots, but the mound builders buried their valuable artifacts in the *tails* of the effigies. About right—" he pointed to an untouched spot, "—here. Now then, round up some strong hands to get these headstones replaced this afternoon, and post the entire hill off-limits. I will be out tomorrow bright and early with the traps."

The committee assured him of their cooperation and trundled down the hill with an air of excited anticipation. Farnsworth, however, already felt his spirit dreading the night he was about to spend in a graveyard.

The long twilight of a mid-June evening illuminated Heavenly Hope Cemetery with an unworldly glow, colorless and two-dimensional. The spring canopy, not yet dense, of the stately bur oaks shush-shushed in the steady breeze; dappled black shadow and gray starlight danced over gravestones nestled in young bearded heads of brome grass.

Tucked in the thick shadow of an oak, Charles D. Farnsworth pulled his field jacket tighter against the cool breeze and tried to focus on movement that implied more than wind on foliage. He had chosen his place carefully, so that his gaze could easily roam between the Indian mound on the edge of the hill and the again-standing monument of Jedidiah Dodge. He'd wanted the monument erected for tonight, so the "bear" could easily find the right grave in the dark.

The graverobber would have to come back tonight. Farnsworth had promised that tomorrow the cemetery would be a place of death and dismemberment via "Kenyan lion traps."

Farnsworth had seen at once the difference between holes dug by claws, and holes dug by a shovel. And the culprit had to be a committee member. No stranger had been inspired by the local paper—it hadn't been published yet when the latest excavations occurred. Farnsworth suspected he himself inspired the graverobber, when he'd first mentioned possible artifacts in the Indian mound. At the same time, the robber had been handed the chance at last to see if that Jedidiah Dodge treasure story was really true.

How easy to convince oneself that the treasure was real, and still there; that all the other robbers simply missed the mark. Alas, heretofore there had been no way to check. Since few outsiders knew about both myth *and* cemetery, any grave digging would have immediately pointed a finger at the members. But when one had a bear, a professionally verified culprit, to blame the damage on . . .

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Farnsworth almost chuckled out loud. He could envision any one of the three, even the old farmer, digging away in an oft-dug grave; a lottery ticket bought with sweat, and doubtless equally disappointing. Any one of them could probably have moved the gravestones, too. Some dislocated by the bears were in truth too massive for the committee members to budge; but the few tipped or dislodged the second time were smaller ones, already tippy or unstable. The Dodge monument was the only puzzle. Farnsworth considered even he would have a hard time pushing it over, and he spent many an evening at the college gym, keeping in tight shape. Keeping his mind off other things. . . .

Yes, the monument was a puzzle. Yet it supposedly got tipped on a regular basis—an inside joke perpetrated by one of the committee members, Farnsworth suspected. Obviously there was an old trick to it, some hidden lever, perhaps. Or, tall but relatively slender, perhaps it was top-heavy.

The night grew as dark as it was going to get. Out in the middle of the wildlife preserve, not even a yard light from a far-off farm polluted the even blue-black of the sky. The stars shone brilliantly to the horizon; the Milky Way above was a solid granular band. In the northern sky the aurora began to dance in slow green streamers, brightening and growing through the trees, adding to the eeriness of the old cemetery on the hill. Fireflies attempted a few drifting glows in protected areas between oaks and tombstones. Farnsworth could catch the scent of the river and the prairie's myriad spring blooms coming up on the breeze. He tried to focus on the smell and sight and sound of nature, tried to clamp his attention to the mound and grave in question, tried to make his gaze watch only for the expected visitor, who had to come tonight or the game was over.

But Charles Farnsworth was acutely aware of being in the middle of a graveyard, and could too clearly see the gravestones, and then the gravestones as they had been 100 years ago, 120, 150 years, surrounded by sun or snow or rain and mourners, fathers and mothers and children and spouses, weeping, the final rite echoing away through the trees, *ashes to ashes, dust to dust* . . .

In his mind he stood beside *her* grave once again, his jaw clenched against devastating emotions, sympathetic pats on his shoulder threatening to bring down his facade, and in his head reeled all the horror of those final months, the complete disarray of his heart. Why couldn't he ever remember her as she had been?

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On their first date? On their wedding day? On just *any* day during their too-short season? Tending the garden. Clucking over his tanks of zoological specimens. Laughing at an inscrutable Brit joke. Paring supper vegetables, that small, ordinary act of devotion, her hands graceful and capable—but he only saw her hands as skeletons wrapped with dark-bruised parchment, the veins collapsed or burned to toilet paper from the chemo. He saw her wealth of thick hair as remnant cobweb tufts at her nape. He saw her eyes resolute and distracted and trying to comfort him—*him*—and behind that courage rose a sickening wall of fear that all his strength and spirit and gallantry and intrepidity could neither comfort, nor ease, nor even touch.

Ashes to ashes.

Farnsworth blinked at the spring night and the graveyard and ran a hand over his eyes. He heaved a long sigh as he leaned back against the rough oak bark. *Some days,* he thought, *I forget that she's gone. And then I remember.* And then he would remember *how* she died, and for the rest of the day he'd feel he'd got in the wrong world. . . .

He sensed before he saw anything that someone was afoot in the graveyard.

Straightening and tensing, Farnsworth cleared his mind of all else and focused intently on the play of shadows and starlight. The wind rose and ebbed, never entirely ceasing, so that the hiss of grass and leaves masked any other sounds of movement on the hill.

At last he caught the silhouette of a lone person—slender, ruling out Pamela Wallashek—skulking without aid of a light along the route taken on previous excursions up the hill. The silhouette resolved into the night-shadowed form of a man, carrying a long rod in each hand—the handle of a shovel, Farnsworth guessed, and the grip of a metal detector. The man walked with more caution than one might move along a dark but reasonably well-known route, as though thoughts of steel teeth closing on a leg coursed through his mind.

He went straight to the grave of Judge Jedidiah Dodge. Farnsworth, less than fifteen strides away, easily discerned the flicker of red and amber lights from the metal detector's pan as it moved hither and yon over the much-trampled grave site. Little beeps revealed the silver dollars with which Farnsworth had earlier salted the grave. He'd managed to come up with five dat-

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ing from the 1800s; they'd have to do—double eagles were not to be had on a day's notice. The man began to dig. Farnsworth nodded and continued to watch. Let the fellow dig his own grave for a while, he thought.

The man found one of the silver dollars, checked it with the quick flash of a penlight, and began to shovel with much enthusiasm. Absorbed with the activities of the graverobber, Farnsworth at first dismissed a new sound coming on the wind, almost beneath the threshold of hearing—

But hear it he did. Grunting, mewling, snuffling—it had been coming up the hill from the south for several minutes and was already under the trees in the graveyard. A thick black shape like a beer keg appeared suddenly in the long grass behind the oblivious digger. Before Farnsworth could shout a warning, the little black keg reached out a curious paw to the man's trousers, and with a grumble of curiosity, tugged. The man yelped in surprise and whirled. Then he saw the baby bear, gave another yell of surprise, raised the shovel over his head.

Farnsworth recognized the voice. "Borchert!" he called. "Don't hurt it! Put the shovel down and walk slowly—" Too late.

Alley Borchert whipped the shovel forcefully down, squarely whacking the little bear's swollen, hornet-stung nose.

The cub bawled out, and kept bawling.

— Answered by a roar of maternal outrage. A black mass of impossible size crashed through the trees and was on the erstwhile graverobber at once. Borchert shrieked as the great animal sent him flying with a blow. The mother bear bellowed in fury and pounced again. Human screams and animal growls filled the night with clamor and chaos.

So swift was the attack, Farnsworth thought Borchert would be already ripped to shreds by the time he ran the fifteen strides from his hiding place to the flailing among the tombstones. He snatched up the discarded metal detector and brought it down with all his might on the sow's rump, breaking the implement in pieces.

"Borchert! Alley! Get up a tree if you can." Farnsworth veered for the nearest cover—Dodge's monument. "A small tree. Way up —*uh!*"

The sow turned with astonishing speed, catching Farnsworth in an instant; her great forepaw lashed out. The impact caught him in the shoulder and sent him flying against Dodge's monument.

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He felt the marble bole slowly topple beneath him, as he was pressed breathless against the face of the inscription; together they crashed to earth.

The bear sprang for Farnsworth, who rolled desperately aside, dazed, instinctively looking for a weapon, other cover, anything. Somewhere deep in his brain he chastised himself for not bringing his Smith & Wesson .35 semiautomatic. At point-blank range it would take down a bear, especially aimed by a man who knew all the kill points of big animals.

Alley Borchert still flailed on the ground, his terrified screams growing wracked and dry. The baby bear's frightened bawling arose from farther and farther away as it fled down the hill toward the river. The sow hesitated.

Then chose Borchert.

The giant black bulk fell on the would-be graverobber. His shriek of agony did not quite mask the crunch and snap of bone. The hideous sound impelled Farnsworth to struggle to rise, his breath still not coming, his left arm hanging numb and useless from the shoulder, his right hand hitting against something hard and sticky in the grass—

The honey trap. His fingers closed on the taped canisters. He lurched to his feet and yelled with everything left in his lungs.

The bear whirled, rose on her hind legs, and roared, her tremendous bulk enlarged by the night and the smell of blood and the adrenaline awash in Farnsworth's very pores. He had a fleeting conviction that Dodge County, Wisconsin, had been invaded by Kodiak grizzlies.

She came for him, her speed in the dark almost impossible to gauge, her jaws gaping. He slammed the honey trap into her face.

The trigger ignited like a red and white solar flare, hissing brilliance devouring the night all around. The air abruptly filled with pepper gas, acid eating into eyes, mouth, skin, sucking at both lung and stomach contents. Farnsworth threw himself hard to the dew-wet grass and rolled until he crashed against stone. He lay there gagging and blinded, listening to the turmoil erupting in the night, furious choking roars, the earth raked under maddened claws, the beast's massive weight backing into tombstones, crashing blindly into trees.

Farnsworth forced himself to freeze. Should any movement or sound distract that anguished rage, death would be savage and quick.

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But the sow was racing off as best she could. Every few strides she dug her pepper-spray saturated muzzle into the grass, muffled grunts turning to whimpers. Farnsworth considered his options hurriedly. She was probably blinded, her sense of smell destroyed, both temporary conditions. But she'd gotten the full blast of the canister; he'd received only an incidental ricochet. The effects of that tiny dose were enough to convince him that the bear family was not coming back.

A sharp piece of stone dug into his cheek. When his watering eyes adjusted to the night, he raised his head and discovered he was pressed against the base of Dodge's monument. The center of the base was cracked. A displaced shard revealed a black cavity within the marble headstone.

"It's hollow," he murmured, realizing why the stone was so easily tipped.

He could fit a hand up into the monument. It contained something. His exploring fingers traced long sticks, flat plates, flanged and rounded objects — lots of them. *Familiar* objects. He grasped one of the smaller pieces and worked it out through the crack.

The eye of a zoologist recognized it even in starlight. "A cervical vertebra," Farnsworth said in wonder. "—Of a horse!"

A nearby moan drew his attention. Alley Borchert was still alive. Farnsworth stood on very shaky legs and acknowledged that he himself had taken a mauling; a deep pounding ache started working its way through the numbness in his shoulder. Borchert was a mass of torn clothing, blood, and joints bending at wrong angles. His heartbeat was strong, and Farnsworth managed to pick him up and work his way down the hill to the hidden zoology vehicle. He felt a flush of satisfaction as he arranged the unconscious shirttail relative of Jedidiah Dodge in the back seat of the Suburban. He'd robbed this graveyard, at least, of a new corpse.

Charles Farnsworth walked into the hospital room — hospitals and their rooms were another place he'd vowed never again to set foot in, but that vow had been broken long before this; the life of a field zoologist wasn't exactly without hazard—and found the committee members already visiting their healing comrade Albert Dodge Borchert.

"Professor," Pamela Wallashek, still in game-warden tans, greeted him ebulliently.

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"Well, come on in," said Chas Sadoski, offering his chair, which was the only one in the room. "Here, set down, looks like you need this more'n I do."

Farnsworth did not often take over chairs from octogenarians, but this time he made an exception. After two days, every muscle in his body seemed to hurt worse, the sling contraption holding a cracked scapula in place was giving him fits, and bashing his face against a marble tombstone did nothing for his classic profile. Still and all, he was in quite splendid shape compared to Alley Borchert. The man was a mass of puncture wounds and casts, none of the injuries, fortunately, permanently crippling.

"I take it you are on the mend, Mr. Borchert?" Farnsworth inquired.

Borchert narrowed his one eye that would open. "Don't know whether to thank you or come after you with Chas's eight-gauge, Professor. Pullin' that bear off'n me and all. But I wouldn't a been *out* there if it hadn't been for you."

Farnsworth had explained his lion-trap ruse to the committee members. Somehow, none of them save Borchert was too surprised. "Well, you did ask for my assistance in dealing with the vandals. You did not specifically limit the field to the four-legged kind."

Pamela had gone on a chair raid; she returned with two more and plunked them around Borchert's bed.

"Now," said Farnsworth, "you all were kind enough to share some anecdotes concerning Judge Jedidiah Dodge. I thought you might be interested in this." He took an eight-by-ten printout from an inside jacket pocket and held it up.

"A horse?" Chas passed the picture around. "Some Appaloosy blood there."

"Looks like an old photo," Pamela remarked.

Farnsworth nodded. "Over a hundred years old, actually. I downloaded this from a daguerreotype scan. The horse was described as a golden sorrel. 'The color of a double eagle,' to quote exactly. I have had an interesting jaunt on the Internet, specifically in library archives, and I thought you might be interested in some actual history of Jedidiah and his times."

Even Alley Borchert came to attention. "Did you find anything about the treasure? Did old Jedidiah really take his lady's fortune to the grave with him?"

"Indeed he did."

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The two sitting attendees nearly jumped to their feet. Alley would have if he could.

"What?"

"Really?"

"No kidding?"

"I found Jedidiah's genealogy and public records of both his law practice and his horse-breeding business. Quite fascinating, especially if one reads between the lines. As a barrister, he was quite the flimflam man. Most of his success in the courts and as a judge came from fostering a notion that he was somehow related to Henry Dodge, the first territorial governor of Wisconsin and after whom Dodge County is named.

"However, scoundrel that he was otherwise, apparently Jedidiah took his horse business quite seriously. His success allowed him some philanthropy with school and church activities—'beloved benefactor,' as it were—and, more interesting zoologically, he recorded the lineage of his breed in painstaking detail. They all traced to a founding mare—" Farnsworth indicated the picture he'd brought, "—an animal which he appears to have held in such high regard, it might as well have been Pegasus flown down from Mount Helicon. Dodge made great efforts to keep the traits of that mare throughout the generations, especially the golden color and the speckling."

Chas Sadoski's white head was nodding enthusiastically. "I seen them horses," he said. "Back before World War Two, lots a horses still worked the fields. You could see a Dodge Sorrel ever' now and again. They was an oddball lot, though. I remember my gran'pa saying they wasn't much popular after Jedidiah died."

"That's basically correct," Farnsworth confirmed. "The breed was promoted as a work horse, but they were displaced by Clydesdales and Percherons around the turn of the century."

"What about the treasure?" Borchert asked, impatient as always.

"You and your treasure," warden Pamela scolded. "Look where it got you."

"Well, he was *my* ancestor. It'd be *my* treasure." Alley Borchert scowled belligerently. "I had every right to go and dig up the old bastard's grave."

"In that case—" Farnsworth delved into another jacket pocket and came up with a palm-filling bone. "This would be yours."

Borchert took it with his one operating hand. "What 's this?"

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"The fifth cervical vertebra of *Equus caballus,*" Farnsworth said. "Neck bone of a horse."

"From Dodge's monument?" Chas asked. On the day following the attack, the healthy committee members had returned to the cemetery (with several of Farnsworth's stout graduate students as bear protection) to check out the incredible report of a hollow headstone. None of them as yet admitted to being the prankster who, for whatever reason, had been tipping over the monument on a yearly basis.

"It's your treasure, Mr. Borchert. The entire skeletal remains of Dodge's golden mare. Her name was Lady."

The committee members slowly shook their heads. "Why in thunder would a man go to the trouble," Chas Sadoski muttered, perplexed.

Farnsworth did not enlighten him. Not many men find igniting within themselves a bond so deep that, even should the object of this love be taken from the earth ere too short a season, the devotion remains—so steadfast and agonizing and fresh that, decades hence, a man would take it to the grave with him.

Heavenly Hope Cemetery remained peaceful, more or less. The bears did not return, nor did gravediggers, and when committee members stopped by they found only long grass to cut. The gravestones stayed put, including the tall monument whose fine horse carving would slowly wear away to nothing but a blank oval. But until such time, it stood as an icon to an era, its intricately packed contents replaced out of respect for the man who loved a horse, its bottom repaired and evenly smoothed so that it rested solidly upon its base.

On August 12, after one of those sweltering days that Wisconsinites refer to as "tornado weather," late afternoon thunderheads inflated high into the sky and local winds picked up, growing through sunset and into a tumultuous twilight. The bur oaks of Heavenly Hope Hill tossed their heads until little green acorns rat-a-tatted off stone markers. Thunder snapped and boomed and echoed down along the river and off into the prairie. Big raindrops splattered, hard-driven by the wind, until lightning reflected off mirrors of water pouring down the dead marble.

A gust howled up the hill and through the trees, and hit against the tall dark monument of Jedidiah Dodge. The force of the air against the stone resounded in an odd way, or so it would seem

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had anybody been there to hear it, as though it were piping in an almost-human voice. An illusion of rain and wind, surely, that babbled, perhaps, the words "Dealer takes one," or maybe "Jack-high straight flush, and you're a sure loser." And perhaps the soaking mud beneath the monument softened a little too much, having been disturbed earlier in the year and not yet settled, so that the monument's base sank ever so slightly forward. Because when another of those huge, swirling gusts came up through the trees and hit against the back of the top-heavy marble bole, it imparted just enough energy to set it rocking — hither — yon — hither — and over, onto its face atop the grave of Jedidiah Dodge, with the freed wind shrieking *"Yiiiiiii"* off into the night. ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

C	O	M	B	■	C	O	L	A	■	W	O	L	F	S
A	S	I	A	■	A	R	A	T	■	I	V	I	E	S
R	I	D	S	■	T	A	R	T	■	L	A	I	N	E
R	E	G	I	N	A	L	D	H	I	L	L	■	■	■
■	R	E	L	I	C	■	■	E	N	G	■	A	S	P
■	■	■	■	B	O	L	D	■	C	R	A	D	L	E
B	A	A	L	■	M	E	E	K	■	O	N	I	O	N
A	C	L	U	B	B	A	B	L	E	W	O	M	A	N
R	H	I	N	E	■	K	I	E	V	■	N	E	N	E
D	E	A	T	H	S	■	T	E	A	R	■	■	■	■
S	S	S	■	E	I	S	■	■	N	A	C	R	E	■
■	■	■	P	A	S	C	O	E	S	G	H	O	S	T
A	D	E	A	D	■	O	B	I	T	■	I	L	S	A
D	A	N	T	E	■	T	I	R	O	■	M	E	E	T
A	D	D	E	D	■	T	E	E	N	■	E	S	N	E

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NEXT ISSUE...

Meeting of the Minds
BY BENJAMIN SCHUTZ

The Last, Best Chance
BY SUZANNE JONES

Love Nor Money
BY DAVID DELMAN

Christ's Tears
BY KATE WILHELM

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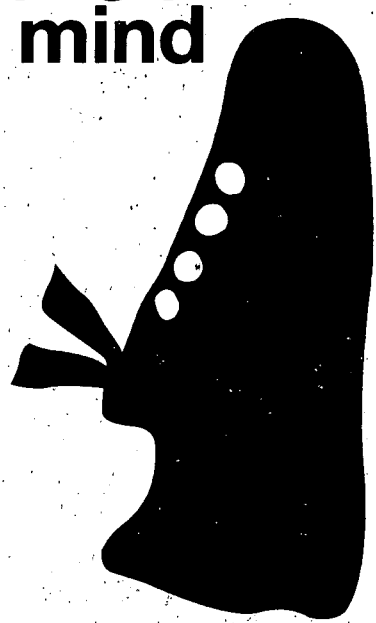

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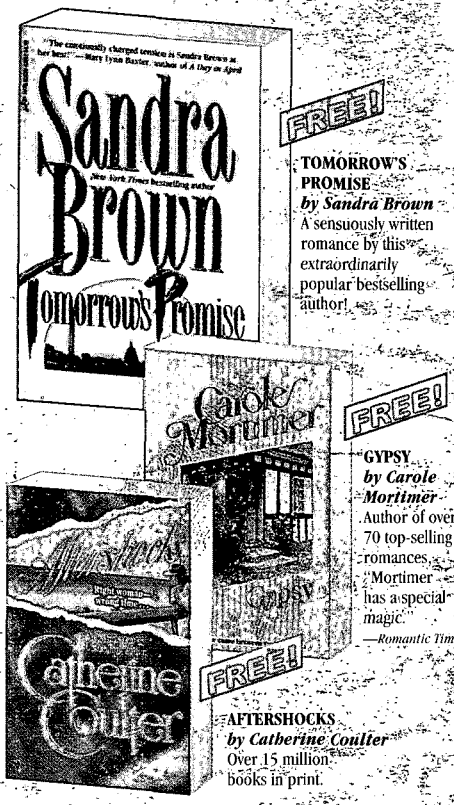

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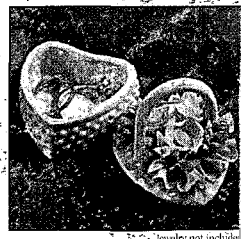

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